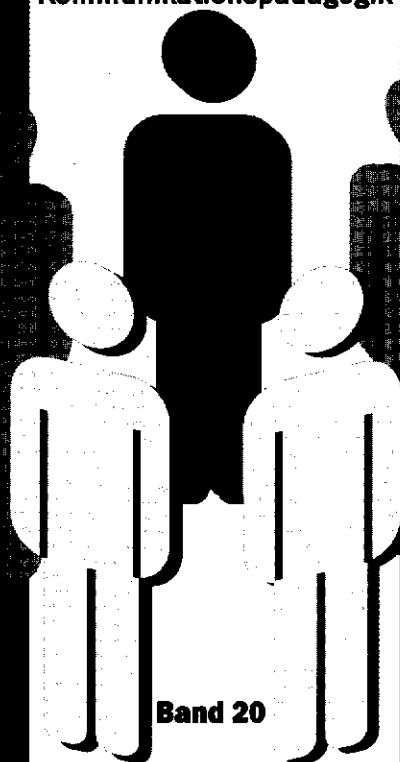


Henner Barthel
Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.)

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Jaakko Lehtonen

Beyond Civil Society:
Citizens as Decision-makers in a Customer-oriented
Society

Communication is a path from the individual to the community.

The ultimate goal of communication in a democratic society is to engage administrators, politicians, citizens, and their organizations in a process of thinking about the desired future for their community and their nation. The Latin phrase *Communicare est participare*, (in a democracy) “communication means to participate,” is repeated throughout the scientific work of Hellmut Geißner (Geißner 2000). The question to be discussed in the present paper is, who are the participants in that dialogue in our post-modern society, and what authority do they have to open the dialogue, set the agenda and decide on the outcomes of that dialogue?

The question relevant to the themes discussed in the papers of this compilation is: are society’s policies and practices determined in a bottom-up process? In a top-down process the government and full-time politicians set the agenda, whereas in a bottom-up process the citizens are in a position to initiate topics for public discussion and decision-making. In the imagination of many Europeans, of which I am one, the United States has been the promised land of participatory democracy. But democracy has become commercialized and professionalized. To quote *The Economist* (8/14/99): “In the United States much of the activity involved in getting initiatives on the ballot such as collecting signatures has been taken over by

professional firms and [...] many referendum campaigns have become expensive affairs far removed from the grassroots.”

Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone* (2000), paid attention to an alarming phenomenon in American society: fewer and fewer people are involved in civic life, fewer citizens turn out at the polls, participate in community organizations, or go to church. At the same time the public administration is said to be moving towards a more citizen-oriented culture. In this paper, the question will be asked whether the new public service culture really is citizen-oriented or customer-oriented, and whether the ultimate goal really is empowerment and encouragement of participation, or whether it is customer satisfaction. The lonely bowler will be described as the sacrifice made in exchange for a neo-liberal public policy which treats the citizen as a consumer, and allows big corporations to interfere in public management by active public affairs strategies, thereby replacing the individual citizens as active members of democracy.

Post-modernity

According to the prophets of post-modernity, ours is an age of cynicism and negative futurism. In the post-modern organization, the traditional employment relationship based on mutual commitment is being replaced by the vigorous reappearance of market forces. The post-modern citizen (or customer) is characterized as not committed to any idea, system, or value. S/he is skeptical and cynical with respect to the promises of advertisers, employers, and politicians. S/he is exposed to so many issues having potential moral implications that s/he tolerates chaos and disorder – or is

resigned to the erosion of ethical principles in society, or to pollution, and the depletion of the earth's resources.

Stevenson's (2002) interviewee uses an appropriate expression, "quiet despair", to describe the feeling of powerlessness and cynicism of citizens before leaders who ignore their needs. Stevenson advances the idea that in industrialized countries the concept of community has been threatened by the new global economy which is eroding the social infrastructure. In the new financial community people are too busy working on their individual futures to participate in the life of the community.

The new economic environment is not the only reason for Stevenson's quiet despair. *Abstentione* has always been implicit in representative democracy: in elections the citizen delegates the making of policy choices to a representative who has his/her own preferred policies; however, there is another reason for the dissatisfaction of present day voters. They may feel that their delegates no longer have any power either, and that the decisions are made in the lobbies and in the assembly rooms of big international corporations.

Social capital means networks, norms and mutual trust. Robert Putnam, one of the fathers of the social capital concept, suggests that the social capital of the U.S. society is drying up: mutual trust is breaking down, church attendance is down, union membership is declining, people bowl – but alone, not as members of a bowling club. His findings hold good not only in U.S. society, but in most Western European countries as well.

Public *fora* for debating public issues have fallen in importance not only in U.S. society, but in most Western European countries as well. Putnam's premises have been criticized, but the phenomena, a decline of interest in public issues, diminishing political participation and lack of commitment to public issues have a familiar ring in many countries. The same kind of individualizing tendency can be found in Scandinavia, in Germany, in the

U.K., in France and so on. The processes in society that sound the alarm for Putnam are common to the whole so-called developed western welfare civilization. Putnam suggests that social connectedness is on the decline and that communities are suffering from a new absence of civic-mindedness. Voter turnout rates have been declining in most Western countries; Putnam claims that people have been disconnected from their political system. Citizens have become spectators of the political arena. Civic society is disappearing – or is it?

Associations, clubs, interest groups, societies and other coalitions of people which together make up civil society are often called the third sector of society, alongside the state and the market. If Putnam's prophecies come true, only two "sectors" are left: the state and the market. Of these two, however, the power of national government is falling off at the same rate as the rate of the increase in the globalization of the market. Under certain circumstances, non-governmental organizations, such as Greenpeace, seemingly make use of power and force big corporations to back down, but such endeavors are more often acts of rebellion against decisions already made than initiatives in relation to new issues. Non-governmental organizations may demonstrate against globalization or against nuclear power, but their chances of steering the ship around are limited.

What are the causes of civic disengagement? Putnam's social capital concept may not capture the whole phenomenon. Scholars often connect citizens' passivity with cynicism and absence of trust (for further discussion, see Durlauf 2002). It may be that there are a number of phenomena in society which together contribute to this cynicism: the disrepute that politics has fallen into, scandals involving politicians, global processes, and so on. One possible scapegoat is television and the entertainment industry: are they responsible for voter apathy, or have the new technologies perhaps alienated the electorate from social participation?

New Media

Critics of the bowling alone notion have suggested that civil society is not vanishing but that, on the contrary, new forms of social capital may be developing. Advocates of the new technology-based virtual society would claim that social capital is not on the decrease but is looking for new ways of connecting people. They claim that Internet chat rooms, self-help groups, virtual communities and friendship networks create and maintain in cyberspace a new kind of dialogue. In a study carried out in the U.K., the majority of the respondents wanted to use computers to vote, convey opinions to government and obtain information from the government (Marcella, Baxter 2000). It is true that the Internet and the new mobile phone applications are making a new kind of discussion possible, but this discussion is conducted between isolated individuals. Chatting alone corresponds to the bowling alone concept in terms of interpersonal contacts. Chatting alone may not create the same feeling of belongingness, trust and understanding of shared responsibility as coming together in church, in clubs, and on other occasions.

On the other hand, human beings are extremely adaptive and the new virtual environment has the potential to change man's perceptions of the sense of community. Kanazava (2002) offers an interesting perspective to this issue. He criticizes Putnam's thesis that one of the reasons for the decline in social capital has been the tendency of television to make the communities people experience wider and shallower. According to Kanazava, human psychological mechanisms have difficulty comprehending entities that did not exist in the environment where the system was developed. The human brain has difficulty distinguishing real friends from people they see on television. Television did not exist in the

“environment of evolutionary adeptness” where every realistic image had its counterpart in physical reality. Therefore, the brain sees nothing shallow in the picture: watching television or sitting before a DVD is interpreted in the brain as participating in civic groups because the brain does not really know that we are not participating in them (Kanazava 2002, 171).

Some of us hold the opinion that consulting citizens directly is the only truly democratic way to determine policy. However, a rush away from the present representative democracy to direct democracy is unlikely. The use of advisory referenda may grow because of the technology which makes it easier to hold them. But selecting between a “yes” and “no” button may not be the same thing as communication proper in a community. That electronically mediated networks could substitute for the traditional face-to-face relationship, resulting in a new kind of virtual community and the feeling of a new kind of “communitarianship” is a belief which does not find any empirical support in recent developments. Both communities and the relationships sustained by communities sharing meanings may soon all be gone and replaced by commoditized instrumental relationships backed by the commoditization and commercialization of all social life (cf. Stevenson 2002).

In his recent article, Gary Selnow (2002) writes about the farmers in Kosovo who, thanks to the Internet, now can communicate with their colleagues in California. For the farmer in the Balkans, the Internet did indeed bring a new dimension: it helped in the reconstruction of civil society and it helped in getting rid of the communist regime, and it offered a new channel for individuals to make social contacts; but my question is whether it has brought democracy in its train to the Balkan republics – or indeed to anywhere?

Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary defines democracy as “a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and

exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.” In addition to elections, referenda are processes in which the ordinary private citizen may make his voice heard. But what is the significance of referenda as people-initiatives in our societies? Mandatory referenda may even today play a meaningful role in decision-making procedures in Switzerland, but in most countries referenda are advisory and they are arranged only in situations when the topic is too hot for the politicians to decide, or when the issue concerns moral and lifestyle principles. Topics such as abortion or alcohol distribution are risky for the politician’s image but do not touch upon the distribution of power in society. The voters are offered an opportunity to discuss the issue and directly cast their vote, but they do not have the right to set the agenda. The issue is predefined and the agenda is set by the government, not by the citizens.

The Other Side of Society: Organizations

In the second half of the nineties and in the first years of the new millennium, the conscience of business organizations has been shaken by a new kind of movement: the demand for corporate social responsibility, CSR. It means, in brief, that business be conducted in a manner that meets or exceeds the ethical, legal, commercial and public expectations that society has of business. A company’s CSR program is its response to the criticism leveled by various stakeholders against the old business practices in environmental, employment, human rights, and ethical issues. Although corporations are expected to benefit financially from socially responsive strategies, CSR is for most companies an act of faith. CSR has been described as a revolution which is reshaping business thinking. Vicki Jayne

(2002) asks, however, in her article whether the revolution in management thinking is real or just rhetorical. Some companies seem to have high-minded promises in their mission statements but the talk precedes behavior.

Enron may be the best recent example of a cosmetic approach to social responsibility. Before its collapse, the company was voted the best company to work for and its code of ethics comprised 65 pages.

The question naturally arises if company claims about ethicality and social responsibility are true and sincere, or pure and simple public relations puff. Motives for socially responsible behavior may be to keep the company's customers satisfied and to gain public approval for its operations. The reverse side of organizations' eagerness to commit to social charitableness is their increased interest in interfering in public decision making, in which the central channel of communication is known as lobbying.

For business organizations and the various interest groups in society, lobbying may be the most effective medium in the execution of their public affairs policies. The federal governments both in the United States and in the European Union have recently sought ways to control lobbying and to lay down some ground rules. During the winter of 2003, the Advisory Council for Municipal Lobbying in New York State discussed ways of restricting lobbying. However, the issue is a delicate one. It is obvious that the lobbying efforts of big tobacco companies to dissuade municipalities from enacting anti-smoking laws is ethically questionable, but the problem is how and where draw the dividing line between acceptable and proscribed forms of lobbying. Efforts by various small civic organizations to be heard in the legislative process should be counted among the fundamental rights of citizens while the efforts of some others may be regarded as unacceptable and thus disallowed.

As Jane Kirtley (1999) states in her article in the *Quill Journal*, the secret mediation of public issues silences the voices of citizens and runs counter to the ideals of openness, accountability, and public oversight. Today, lobbying is a broader concept than that contained in the original attempt to influence politicians in the lobby of the Parliament building. It still means influencing politicians, but also means attempting to influence government institutions and civil servants on all levels of public administration. According to Phil Harris (2002), lobbying is part and parcel of modern political communication. There are currently 28,000 non-governmental organizations in Brussels alone, lobbying to influence EU policy. The number of European lobbyists has increased since the early 1970's more than ten times. According to Wilcox (2000), there are more than 20,000 lobbyists trying to turn the heads of legislators in Washington. Lobbying and government relations in general are said to be the fastest growing specialties in public relations. Harris (2002, 49) connects the increase in lobbying with the fact that the governments initially relinquished their hold on various sectors of the economy and are now trying to recapture control through regulation, and the more government regulatory policy there is, the higher is the level of lobbying. Haug and Koppang (1997) ask whether organizations calculate that money invested in influencing governments yields a higher return for a company or an industrial sector than investments in product development or marketing.

Lobbying is obviously here to stay. It is also obvious that each organization that wishes to look after its interests will continue to influence the passage or defeat of legislation likely to influence its operational conditions. Lobbying is a fundamental element in political communication and in the process of decision-making, yet it is questionable from the point of view of democracy. Many cultures attach to the word 'lobbying' a negative meaning. A job title of lobbyist would not be on the top ten list of

professions, although there have always been individuals, delegations and representatives of groups or organizations who want to inform decision-makers about their interests and, at the same time, sway the issue in their direction.

Lobbying is always practiced in secret: citizens are told neither the agenda nor the results of discussions between lobbyists and politicians or civil servants. Lobbying can be good or bad. It may influence an official or sway him by suspect means such as logrolling, pressure, or bribery. On the one hand, lobbyists can provide politicians and the legislators with useful information; on the other hand, lobbying often means working for the interest of a powerful pressure group at the cost of the silent majority.

In the post-modern democracy, corporations are replacing individuals. Big companies rather than citizens (or the political parties and unions as the mouthpiece of citizens) are today the communication partners of governments. For individuals the concept of public discourse means that they seldom are heard before decision-making takes place, although they are sometimes informed about the decisions made behind closed doors between industry and the politicians.

Business counts what counts: social accountability interests companies because the image of a responsible corporate citizen may bring with it a competitive advantage. The increasing significance of corporations as authorized citizens in society is reflected in the many concepts which have gained popularity in the organizational and management literature: corporate citizenship, corporate responsiveness and responsibility, legitimacy theory, corporate social performance, corporate political strategy, etc. All of these concepts and theories teach the organizations about their social role: corporations are citizens with power who need to have a strategy which will assist them in participating in public decision making and to use this power to bend the social environment to support

their business goals. Organizations develop strategies on how to engage and successfully influence the outcomes of public policy making and learn to be better players in the marketplace of society. The number of interest groups is on the increase and their skills in how to influence decision makers are improving all the time. Mahon, Warticic and Fleisher (2002) ask the question whether the proliferation of public interest groups leads to better public policy processes and outcomes, or in the fractionation and paralysis of those processes.

Since the publication of R.E. Freeman's "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder approach" (1984), stakeholder theory has been one of the leading organizational theory of our times. The theory – or theories – does not assign any specific role to government or society among a company's stakeholders. It posits the idea that a firm is an aggregation of several stakeholders who are seeking to advance their own interests. It does not directly specify the interrelationship between the company and society, but emphasizes the role of community relations as a resource that can be used to support economic performance (Lehtonen 2002).

The emerging importance of organizations as corporate citizens also is indicated by the fact that recently several new journals have appeared focusing on the interface between corporations and the government, for example *Business and Politics* (1999) and the *Journal of Public Affairs* (2001). *Public Affairs* is, in addition, a popular theme in journals of politics, sociology, management, and communication.

Towards a Civil Society?

The Civil Society Internet Forum defines the concept civil society as follows: "Civil society is a third sector of society alongside the state and the market. The values underlying civil society include freedom of association, freedom of expression, participatory democracy, and respect for diversity." However, out of the three sectors of society, the state, the market, and civil society, only the market seems to have real power. Market forces are in effect the strongest armed forces in society.

Public debates may belong to the picture of democracy. From the point of view of the business organizations, this is a paradox: most models of public relations recommend avoiding participation in public debate because of the risk of negative publicity. Instead of allowing an issue to become public organizations are advised to apply a strategy which allows potentially harmful issues to be identified in advance and to modify communication in order to gag public criticism. It is in the interests of the company to avoid public conflict.

Stakeholder dialogue, media publicity and public discussion are seemingly conflicting goals. Secret mediation of conflicting interests between business and the authorities may work well enough, but it may encourage corruption and self-interest to the point where it outweighs the public good.

Public participation in public decision-making is said to be the hallmark of democratic society. Democracy is built on the idea of participation by all. However, in the present global society, the parties with power are interested in discussing a public issue only if they feel threatened. One might ask, does democracy, in fact, need crises to survive? In the U.S. media, big scandals in politics and business are often celebrated as victories for democracy. For instance, in connection with the Enron scandal, some

writers commented on the claim that events such as the fraud of the Enron managers bears witness to the depravity of U.S. society (cf. Lehtonen 2002b). Typically, however, commentators did not interpret the scandals as proof of the corruption of the business morals, but as an indication of a democratic society's ability to overcome such crises!

Bringing the Theme to a Head

The concepts of "customer" or "client" imply a passive orientation on the part of the citizen to the parties who provide him with commercial or social services. Eran Vigoda (2002) points to the fact that there is a tension in public management between the state bureaucracy's tendency to see citizens as clients, and efforts to support citizens' involvement and participation in public issues. "Modern societies[...] tend to favor the easy chair of the customer over the sweat and turmoil of participatory involvement" (Vigoda 2002, 527). According to Vigoda, there is an inherent tension in the administration between better responsiveness, which implies a passive, unidirectional reaction to the needs and demands of people, and collaboration with people as partners, which would imply a more active bi-directional act of participation. In democracy, citizens are supposed to be the formal "owners" of the state, but in present day society they only have a more or less symbolic role in the political liturgy.

One customer, one vote. Does the customer orientation practiced by public administration mean the same as it does in marketing? That while products/services offered are tailored to meet the individual needs of the client, the customer has no influence over what constitutes the basic assortment of those products and services. In customer orientation, the

ultimate goal is customer satisfaction which guarantees the loyalty of the customer.

A proposal made in connection with the last presidential election in the U.S. offers a grotesque picture of the possibilities of technology to the virtual dialogue between the people and the politicians. Someone – he introduced himself as a marketing manager – suggested that a computer program already applied in marketing research be used in the dialogue between candidates and their supporters: the program reads an e-mail message sent to the candidate, identifies certain key words and compiles a tailored answer to be sent to the citizen on behalf of the candidate. In constructing the answer, the program selects from a set of ready-made phrases, thus, giving the impression that the presidential candidate himself wrote the letter personally just for him or her. Later on I was told that the proposal of this marketing specialist was put into effect. Man-machine discussion as a surrogate for political dialogue is a hideous example of the consequences of a blind belief in technology as a solution to the crisis of social participation.

The fragmentation of life styles and the individualization typical of the so-called Western postmodern societies bring in their train problems concerning the role of the individual and civil society in the decision – making process of the society. The situation has become complex because of the increased interest being shown by business and various non-profit-making organizations in participating in public decision-making. This can be seen in the upsurge in lobbying on the one hand, and in the customer orientation of the public administration, on the other, which has taught citizens to see themselves as private entrepreneurs who buy public services, lay claim to the quality of the services, but not as citizens who answer for those services. The two processes, the increased activity of organizations

and the decreasing interest of individual citizens in public affairs have resulted in a crisis in classical democracy.

Representative democracy no longer corresponds to the actual distribution of power in the society. The new information technology might offer opportunities for direct participation, but these opportunities have not been exploited so far. The ability to communicate is a prerequisite of participation – “*Communicare est participare*” – but chatting alone in front of a computer screen may not increase the private individual’s interest in participating in public discussion and decision-making.

Endnote

Hellmut Geißner (1998, 1131 ff.) in his recent article gives the concept of *colloquium* several meanings. The ancient meaning was a dialogue, the working form of which is familiar or colloquial. Cicero translated the Greek word for dialogue by disputation or colloquium. A colloquium was a speech given in a concrete situation for a small number of people who have met to talk together about a given theme or for a given purpose. The members of the colloquium searched for the truth whereas later, in medieval times, scholars thought they already knew the truth. Geißner refers to a learned man, Heineccius, who in 1718 wrote that the dialogue in a colloquium is actually just a made-up discussion between educated men: “*EST VERO DIALOGUS FICTUM INTER VIROS DOCTOS COLLOQUIUM.*”

I leave open the question whether this speech should be placed in the category of those who look for the truth, or those who believe they already

know the truth or maybe those who engage in debate in order to exhibit their education with made-up discussion problems.

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