

## Government Efficiency and Effectiveness eGovernment & Digital Public Services Citizen Involvement

*Written interview with Carolin Klingsporn, Projektmanegrin, Liquid Democracy e.V.*

Liquid Democracy e.V. is a non-profit association that develops and realises innovative concepts for democratic engagement. Above all, Liquid Democracy e.V. capitalises on the potentials of the internet to make decision-making processes more accessible. In the written interview on 'Citizen Participation', Carolin Klingsporn explains the approach and structure of the association and its successes.



### What does 'liquid democracy' mean? What does your association stand for?

Our association's vision is a democratic culture where active participation is a given for everyone. We are working towards facilitating greater participation in democratic decision-making processes for more people. This puts them in a stronger position as part of a democracy where their voices and opinions are heard – including in the periods between political elections. Liquid democracy means that barriers to codetermination are removed, and the boundaries between the rulers and the ruled become fluent.

We utilise the potentials of digitisation and develop our own participation software to achieve our vision. Digitisation facilitates communication without location or time constraints. Digital tools enable greater public participation in online political discussions. Since the vast majority of German residents now use the internet, the opportunity to participate online is open to virtually anyone. Online participation creates transparency on political and administrative action, and provides scope for participation. This makes it a great opportunity for our democracy, especially in view of the growing mistrust of representatives standing for election.

### What does your business model look like? What is the public benefit of your association? How would you explain your success?

We are an independent association that began as a voluntary initiative based on a conviction of the democracy-promoting powers of the internet. We are now financed through grants and third-party funds for our non-profit projects, as well as commissions and – to a lesser extent – membership fees. At present, the association has 15 employees.

Our work is not geared towards making a profit, but focused on promoting democracy. We developed the software Adhocracy, which is open source. Anyone can see and access the source code (at <https://github.com/liqd>). This also enables other organisations and initiatives to realise their own online participation projects. Moreover, different engagement projects benefit from each other. Adhocracy is continuously developed, and new functions developed for one project can be transferred to others.

We are an interdisciplinary team that brings different competences together: political scientists work together with software developers and codetermination experts. Our software has been utilised by a broad

range of partners since our formation in 2009: from municipal, state and federal administrations, through political parties and international NGOs to small local initiatives.

### **What is the 'meinBerlin' project all about? How does the project contribute to more efficient communication between Berlin residents and their administration today? What specific success has been achieved?**

MeinBerlin is the central engagement platform of the State of Berlin. Interested citizens can use meinBerlin to express their opinions and ideas relating to administration projects. All online engagement procedures of the Berlin administration at state and district level are bundled on one platform, making them easy to find and publicly accessible. For the citizens, this creates the opportunity to obtain information on administration projects while also actively helping to shape their city. MeinBerlin makes this process easy and time-efficient.

For the administrative staff, meinBerlin facilitates faster and more cost-effective realisation of online engagement procedures. The platform offers standardised and tested engagement templates that staff can fill out and release. This allows the administration to put their ideas, plans and drafts up for discussion and evaluation. Moreover, it can collect and map citizen ideas, create surveys and issue invitations to events. The legally prescribed participation in the establishment of development plans has also been integrated in the platform.

More than 10,000 people have registered on meinBerlin since it went online in 2015. They have contributed over 3,000 ideas and 8,000 comments across more than 260 projects, and voted more than 33,000 times (as at January 2019). Yet, the statistics often fail to reflect the success. More importantly, the quality of the contributions on meinBerlin is of a very high standard. In addition to its own expertise, the administration can draw on valuable input from the citizens in its work. It is in a better position to gear its decisions towards the citizens' needs. Furthermore, asking citizens for their opinion often increases acceptance levels of the measures implemented later.

### **What particular opportunities do digital engagement processes offer in terms of today's potential for democracy? What are their challenges and limits?**

Genuine engagement – whether digital or otherwise – promotes discussion and considers citizens as experts that can offer significant insights for the projects of the administration. Many people see the administration as a large faceless installation. Our approach makes it more accessible to the citizens: it offers them a space where they can communicate their opinions, concerns and ideas. Engagement can enhance the mutual understanding between the administration and the citizens and strengthen the confidence in their respective competences.

Giving citizens a voice means addressing them in various ways. While offers at specific times and locations – such as town meetings – are important, they exclude citizens with limited mobility or availability. Online engagement makes political participation flexible and independent from place or time. Overall, it offers the potential of integrating a greater range of citizens than offline events could achieve by themselves. This makes it crucial to complement local events with online engagement.

The challenge is in designing engagement processes such that they strengthen people's confidence in political and administrative action – and ultimately their confidence in democracy. Thus, the role citizens will play in the process and the impact their opinions will have on the outcome of the decisions must be clearly defined from the outset. Time and again, we face excessive citizen demands for the realisation of their idea, thereby challenging the legitimacy of the decisions made by their elected representatives. However, citizen engagement does not seek to undermine representative democracy. Rather, it should complement and strengthen the existing democracy by offering opportunities for the exchange of opinions and arguments on specific topics.

## What should a modern administration offer? What are the conditions and steps necessary for creating digital engagement formats?

Above all, there has to be a political commitment. No matter how good the software we provide to politicians and the administration, it remains ineffective unless filled with good projects. Good means that the questions are relevant to the citizens, and that the opinions and ideas contributed are actually taken into account. Citizens are quick to notice pro forma engagement or a tendency for their opinions to be shelved. That drastically diminishes motivation for continued engagement.

If the political will exists, administrative staff should be supported in two ways: The provision of central software eliminates the need for designing and programming the complex technical implementation of online engagement from scratch each time. Berlin realised this at an early stage and commissioned us to develop a platform that is available to all administrative staff. Public accessibility of the software source code further makes the administration independent from its service provider. In addition to the open source software, staff need training that also covers effective content for successful engagement procedures. Engagement has to be learned and not every engagement project is successful. We need to persevere to create a thriving engagement culture. And ultimately, that is our vision!

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