1 Towards Knowledge Democracy

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Abstract

The concept of knowledge democracy is meant to enable a new focus on the relationships between knowledge production and dissemination, the functioning of the media and our democratic institutions. The emerging concept of knowledge democracy moreover obliges us to realise that the institutional frameworks of today’s societies may appear to be deficient as far as the above mentioned undercurrents, trends and other developments demand change. We explored the directions for institutional change during the conference.

Democracy is without a doubt the most successful governance concept for societies during the last two centuries. It is a strong brand, even used by rulers who do not meet any democratic criterion. Representation gradually became the predominant mechanism by which the population at large, through elections, provides a body with a general authorisation to take decisions in all public domains for a certain period of time. Representative parliamentary democracy became the icon of advanced nation-states.

The recent decline of representative parliamentary democracy has been called upon by many authors. On the micro-level the earlier consistent individual position of an ideologically-based consistent value pattern has disappeared. The values are present but the glue of a focal ideological principle is not any longer at stock. Fragmentation of values has lead to individualisation, to uniqueness but thereby also to the impossibility of being represented in a general manner by a single actor such as a member of parliament. More fundamentally media-politics destroy the original meaning of representation. On the meso-level the development of political parties to marketeers in the political realm destroys their capacity for designing consistent broad political strategies. Like willow trees they move with the winds of the supposed voters’ preferences. And on the macro-level media-politics dominate. Volatility therefore will probably increase.

The debate on the future of democracy in advanced national societies has not yet led to major innovations. Established political actors try to tackle populism with trusted resources: a combination of anti-populist rhetoric and adoption of the populist agenda. Some of the media have responded by attempting to become “more populist than populists themselves”, almost always at the expense of analytical depth.

Meanwhile, the worldwide web provides for a drastic change in the rules of the game. A better educated public has wide access to information, and selects it
by itself instead of by media filters. Moreover citizens themselves have become media. They may produce world-famous YouTube pictures.

The crucial combination of a network society and media-politics provides new problems and tensions. The political agenda is filled with so-called wicked problems, characterised by the absence of consensus both on the relevant values and the necessary knowledge and information. Uncertainty and complexity prevail.

Advanced societies are characterised by an increasing intensity and speed of reflexive mechanisms. Reflexive mechanisms in a more or less lenient political environment cause overwhelming volatility of bodies of knowledge related to social systems. As all available knowledge is utilised to facilitate reflexive processes, the result of such processes might establish new relationships that undermine the existing knowledge. Social reality has then become unpredictable in principle.

The relationships between science and politics demand new designs in an environment of media-politics, wicked problems and reflexivity. The classical theory on boundary work in order to master the existing gaps between science and politics is nowadays widely accepted among experts. The underlying insight is that scientific knowledge by its very structure never directly relates to action, because it is fragmented, partial, conditional and immunised. This observation is valid for both mono- and multi- disciplinary knowledge. So translation activities are always necessary in order to utilise scientific knowledge for policy purposes.

The literature on transdisciplinary research is dominated by process-directed normative studies. It appears clear to me that the core concept of transdisciplinarity is to be defined as the trajectory in a multi-actor environment from both sources: from a political agenda and existing expertise, to a robust, plausible perspective for action.

In this volume 20 selected and carefully edited essays represent the harvest of the international conference “Towards Knowledge Democracy” which took place on 25–27 August 2009 in Leiden, the Netherlands. The introduction to the harvest is presented in Chap. 2.

The final part of our study is devoted to observations on quiet and turbulent democracies as very different typologies of potential evolutionary patterns of knowledge democracy.

1.1 The overwhelming success of democracy

Democracy is without a doubt the most successful governance concept for societies during the last two centuries. It is a strong brand, even used by rulers who do not meet any democratic criterion. Democracy according to Abraham Lincoln is a very broad concept:

   government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Some centuries later Schumpeter however defines it in a minimal manner: