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## **Prosumerism in eGovernment: between participation rhetoric and co-administration<sup>1</sup>**

"Once fully implemented bureaucracy is among the most difficult social formations to destroy." Max Weber, 1922, p18.

Whilst in the 1990s the transformation of citizens into consumers in the context of New Public Management was criticised (amongst others by Cultural Studies representatives), prosumerism as an element of government with access to electronic media signals a further development in political economising measures. In the discussion of the proponents of eGovernment, prosumerism contributes to a specific promise, namely that of increased efficiency of administrative action on the one hand and the emancipation of the general public on the other. This argument, of an automatic link between rationalisation and democratization, finds unquestioning support in the discourses of both political and technical elites (including those with orientations towards applied research) in Austria. The promise of the change from "overworked civil servants in dusty offices" to "service-orientated personnel" and from "bewildered supplicants" to "participatory citizens" (Grundei/Hanl/Spitzenberger 2003), disguises the reality, which is that the political character of such messages is profoundly ambivalent. The allusion to greater simplicity and speed in bureaucratic processes – which Engemann (2003) identified as the hegemonic "discourse of ease and simplicity" of eGovernment – serves, in the first instance, as a depoliticised reduction of the bureaucratic process merely to the provision of services. Nevertheless, the proponents of eGovernment bureaucracy recognise it (at least implicitly) as a form of governing as soon as they propagate "service efficiency" as a weapon against hierarchies and the asymmetry of information flows. Only in exceptional circumstances, however, is the promised participation clearly identified as "prosumerism" (Jansen/Priddat 2001), or as the "obligation of the citizen to do governing work" (Julliet/Paquet 2001). Usually participation rhetoric, however, fulfils the function of veiling its true purpose – that of externalising the administrative process.

The practical application of the commercial prosumerism model into the area of public administration features similarities as well as differences:

- In contrast to voluntary consumer participation, prosumerism in eGovernment is often characterised by (a legally-based) compulsion.

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<sup>1</sup> The theses of this contribution were largely developed during the research project "How Democratic is e-Government? Public Knowledge Management and Governmentality in Europe" between 2004-2006, which was funded by the Austrian Ministry of Education Science and Culture as a part of the "NODE" programme. Further, the theses are empirically based on the content analysis of strategy papers and the Parliamentary debates which lead to the Austrian e-government law in 2005; in addition, on focussed interviews with members of relevant organisations.

- Whilst IT facilitated consumer participation requires, in addition to technical competence, knowledge of the market, eGovernment also demands that its users have a deep and thorough understanding of bureaucratic processes. In communication with the state, enhanced civic discipline is combined with the techniques of self-management (as discussed in the Governmentality Studies). The commodification of human existence, as illustrated by the “Arbeitskraftunternehmer” concept, i. e. a specific type of self-employment, whereby individuals act as micro-enterprises with limited independence (Voß/Pongratz 1998), finds its complement in the self-managing formal activities of administrative co-workers. Amongst the first applications of eGovernment in Austria was a legal information system, information about social security and approvals for the right to conduct business activities.
- Whilst administrative cooperation through individualised joint administrative processes promotes radical decentralisation, it also increases the potential for the centralisation and personification of social control. The provisions for legal and technical data protection are being threatened by a bureaucratic desire for the combination of what have been up to now widely dispersed sources of data.
- If the targeted integration of consumers’ contributions towards an organisational functional relationship (Voß/Rieder 2005) under the aspect of an exploitation of economic externalities can be criticised (cf Gorz 2004), in the case of eGovernment, it can be seen, additionally, as a specific form of expropriation: citizens, as owners of their personal data (in the sense of a “suum” according to natural law), are obliged to hand them over to a state which itself, in turn, acts as a willing market participant in a liberalised information economy.

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