

BARCAMPS: CONNECTING NETWORKS

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Talk of 'networking' or networking is very much in vogue; network research is currently booming (cf. Stegbauer/Häußling 2010; Fuhse 2016; Stegbauer 2016). The Internet plays a central role in this trend. Nevertheless, virtually established contacts often lack commitment and trustworthiness. Relationships at a distance, facilitated by global technology and driven into the exponential, allow degrees of freedom that can be burdened with extreme ambiguity, even uncertainty. Often, the only way to react to this is through direct face-to-face encounters; personal trust thus seems to remain indispensable, despite all the prophecies of doom.

One form of encounter that responds precisely to this, was developed a good ten years ago, and has since found great demand and spread worldwide, is barcamps. The following remarks deal with this event format and introduce it briefly; they then deal with its function with regard to the problem of networking; and finally, the type of participants who have learned to particularly appreciate barcamps will be examined.

1. What are barcamps?

The emergence of the 'barcamp' event format is attributed to Internet pioneer Tim O'Reilly, who, starting in 2003, invited developers, journalists, programmers, start-up entrepreneurs, Internet thought leaders and other experts to his farm in the San Francisco Bay Area to discuss the present and future of the Internet and related information and communication technologies in a completely open-ended manner. There was no predetermined agenda. Instead, everyone was asked to spontaneously submit their own ideas, projects, and visions for discussion, while the plenum decided on their acceptance, and the participants then distributed themselves among the various sessions offered, depending on their interests and inclinations. The event was organized like a tent camp: People constantly squatted together, discussed together, ate together, sat around the campfire in the evenings, stayed overnight together on O'Reilly's property, and spent some highly inspiring, creative, participatory days together (cf. Hellmann 2012). Almost a convivialist utopia.

In 2005, this event form emancipated itself from its inventor, was opened to everyone, democratized, and from then on spread rapidly worldwide. Already in 2006, the first barcamps took place in Germany (cf. Hellmann 2007). Since then, barcamps have become

a permanent fixture on the Internet scene. And in the meantime it can even be said that barcamps have penetrated into the middle of society.

However, it is still a form of event that is particularly related to the discursive-creative culture of the Internet and its pioneers. Innovations and phenomena of the Web 2.0 era such as co-creation, crowdsourcing, interactive value, open innovation, peer production, prosuming, sharing economy, swarm intelligence, user-generated content, wealth of networks, wikinomics or wisdom of the crowd are all components of a successful bar camp and give this event form a noticeably unconventional touch. Not without reason are barcamps also called „unconferences“.

Symptomatic of this unconventional veneer is first and foremost the 'octolog' of the barcamp culture, the strict observance of which is fundamental to the successful execution of a barcamp. The eight rules are as follows (although barcampers are generally on first-name terms): (1) Talk about the barcamp; (2) Blog about the barcamp; (3) If you want to present, briefly introduce yourself and your topic and write both on a presentation card (all cards are then attached to a single session board); (4) Introduce yourself with only three keywords (make yourself known, but don't take yourself too seriously); (5) There are as many presentations at one time as there are presentation rooms; (6) There are no pre-arranged presentations and no „tourists“ (who just listen and contribute nothing). In short: „No spectators, only participants!“; (7) Presentations last as long as they have to – or until they overlap with the following presentation slot; (8) It would be good if you would hold your own session right at your first Barcamp participation (dare, even if it is difficult at first).

If we then illuminate the canon of values that provides the general framework for real barcamps, several interconnected guiding ideas are worth mentioning, such as diversity, egalitarianism, informality, inclusivity, creativity, participation, and self-organization (cf. Eberhardt/Hellmann 2015). For the process itself, the introduction and proposal rounds are again decisive (Feldmann/Hellmann 2016). Moreover, in addition to the original bar camps, which are open to all kinds of topics, i.e. do not impose any thematic restrictions, there are now also theme camps, which have a much narrower focus in terms of subject matter and are often related to specific professions, political initiatives or leisure activities, as well as corporate camps, which are held in-house by individual organizations (companies, associations, etc.) (cf. Feldmann/Hellmann 2016).

2. Barcamps and social movements: Functional Equivalents

In order to take up the thesis formulated at the beginning that barcamps could fulfill a specific function with regard to the problem of networking, it should first be noted: Barcamps are meetings where the networking of the participants before, during and after the event is among the most important for the participants.

It should also be emphasized that barcamps definitely represent scene meetings, entirely in the sense of Gerhard Schulze's scene theory (cf. Schulze 1992: 459 ff.). This is because barcamps regularly bring together people who share common interests, have often already gotten to know each other through earlier contacts and continue to maintain these contacts in the meantime via certain social media platforms, but nevertheless feel a strong need to meet face to face on a regular basis in order to exchange ideas directly, to be sociable with each other, and to strengthen cohesion. Without such face-to-face time, such relationship networks are in danger of losing all commitment.

At this point, another parallel comes into view. Friedhelm Neidhardt (1985) once described social movements as mobilized networks of networks. In mobilizing their supporters, social movements usually target pre-existing social networks (citizens' initiatives, families, union members, students, etc.). As a result of the mobilization, members of a wide variety of networks then meet and in turn form a temporary social network that lasts only as long as the mobilization continues. Afterwards, the supporters of the movement dive back into their continuing networks (cf. Melucci 1989; Diani 1995).

In the same way, barcamps can be described as mobilized networks of mobilized networks that promote networking among these networks (cf. Hellmann 2007, 2012). Barcamps are particularly suitable for this purpose because the personal involvement of the participants is much stronger due to their high degree of participation. Unlike conventional conference formats, where the participants are mainly condemned to passivity and only the coffee breaks and snacks leave room for direct exchange, this direct exchange at eye level happens at barcamps throughout the day, from morning to evening, in every session. The networking and bonding effects at barcamps are therefore much higher than usual (see Hellmann/Feldmann 2016). Of course, this presupposes an increased willingness to participate and mobilization of barcamp participants, which leads to the last point.

3. Participation raised to the level of a principle: Barcamp participants as event prosumers

The special feature of barcamps is their high degree of participation. While in many conventional formats the participants are only very marginally actively involved in the conference events, the self-organization and co-production of a barcamp by the participants are at the center of the agenda. „No Spectators, Only Participants“ is the maxim – with the consequence that if the participants do not declare themselves sufficiently willing to actively stand up for the success of the Barcamp and to assume co-responsibility, a Barcamp must necessarily fail. At the same time, the participants remain beneficiaries of what generally happens: Production and consumption of a barcamp thus go hand in hand – a development that seems to become a trend in the event industry: the entry of prosumers (cf. Sistenich/Böckler 2012).

In fact, it hits the mark to classify enthusiastic participants of barcamps as prosumers who, in order to be able to experience a barcamp as particularly enriching for themselves, proactively contribute themselves and are significantly involved in the production of this event. Without the commitment and involvement of the participants, a barcamp simply does not take place: It lives from the fact that it is lived by all! In this respect it is said that barcamp participants are event prosumers. However, this may be a sign of a much more general change in society (cf. Gerhards 2001; Hellmann 2016).

Returning to the observation made at the beginning that barcamps fulfill a special function with regard to the problem of networking, and thus concluding, it should finally be pointed out that Berlin has a special significance for barcamps, because the first barcamp in Germany took place in the capital in 2006. In this respect, this article is also related to the title „Made in Berlin“.

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