

SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH PARTICIPATION? A SPECIAL FEATURE OF BARCAMPS

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1. Barcamps: participation raised to a principle

„Barcamps“ represent an event form that is closely related to the Open Space format, has existed for a good ten years, and has now become enormously widespread. The origins of the „barcamp“ event format can be traced back to the Internet pioneer Tim O'Reilly („Web 2.0“), who from 2003 onwards regularly invited developers, journalists, creatives, programmers, start-up entrepreneurs and thought leaders from the Internet scene to his farm in the San Francisco Bay Area for several days of completely informal discussions about the future of the Internet and related information and communication technologies.

What was innovative at the time was that there was no predetermined agenda. Instead, everyone was able to present their ideas, projects and visions for discussion on an ad hoc basis, and the participants then distributed themselves spontaneously among the various sessions offered, depending on their interests.

The event was organized like a tent camp: People constantly squatted together, discussed together, ate together, sat around the campfire in the evenings, also spent the night together there, on O'Reilly's property, and spent some highly inspiring, creative, participatory hours together.

In 2005, this event form emancipated itself from its inventor, was opened to everyone, democratized and spread rapidly. As a result, the first barcamps were held in Germany as early as 2006. Since then, barcamps have become a permanent fixture on the Internet scene worldwide.

In the meantime, barcamps have also gained a lot of attention and recognition far away from the Internet scene. Therefore it can be said: Barcamps have arrived in 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, wkinomics 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“. Participation is the lifeblood of every barcamp, and the self-organization of the sessions is constitutive.

Due to the ad hoc logic with which barcamps are conducted, there is usually no regular form of securing results. In general, the focus on results is rather secondary. The focus is on knowledge exchange and the spontaneity, equal participation and above all participation of those who proactively contribute to the self-organization of a barcamp.

However, this raises the question of how sustainable barcamps actually are. What remains of an event that leaves everyone free to participate according to their interests, skills and curiosity? How sustainable are discussions that are not focused on concrete solutions, measures or projects from the outset? Is participation in itself not without any sustainability?

2. Legitimacy through procedure

To be able to answer this question, a small detour is taken. In 1969, Niklas Luhmann published the classic „Legitimation through Procedure“. The title itself sums up Luhmann's main thesis: by involving participants in the procedure through their own contributions, i.e. through participation, they also contribute to legitimizing the procedure itself, for themselves and for others. This is because active and passive participation in the process binds the participants with regard to the course of the process: regardless of whether they contribute or not, they thereby assume a certain degree of co-responsibility, whatever they do or do not do. If they do not participate at all, the responsibility for their passivity falls back on them, because they could have said something. And if they do participate, the responsibility for their activity falls back on them, because they could have participated in a different way. To put it in a general phrase: along for the ride, along for the ride.

It is precisely this inevitable bonding effect, which results from both active and passive participation in such processes, that ensures a certain sustainability of the process effects: They continue to have an effect beyond the procedure. By participating, one legitimizes the procedure, and whatever emerges from the procedure: The course and outcome of the procedure result not least from how the participants behaved

during the procedure. The sustainability of such processes thus arises precisely through participation, and it is all the greater the more participation is possible.

3. The more participative, the more sustainable!

Against this background, if we turn back to barcamps as an event format that is characterized above all by participation and self-organization, it should have become apparent that even and especially barcamps have their own specific form of sustainability due to the way in which the participants are explicitly encouraged to participate and are thus integrated into the process. The high level of identification of the participants when they contribute their own topics and contributions, the strong emotionalization that barcamps usually trigger in the participants because the moment of sociability, of socializing, is so pronounced at barcamps, the many networking effects, whether acquaintances or friendships, that are regularly established at barcamps: All this contributes to the fact that most of those who have participated in a successful barcamp wish for a repetition of this barcamp at the end, i.e. a repetition of the participation in the proceedings, with all the experiences and adventures they have had during it. The desire for a repetition shows that the resources that went into the participation in the process were not irretrievably used up, but rather regenerated through the participation - almost a paradoxical effect, but at least a strong indication that there is a certain plausibility for the assumption that sustainability can be achieved through participation, even if no securing of results is explicitly pursued, as is the case with barcamps.

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Links: <http://www.barcampus.de/> und <http://www.csrcamp.de/>

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