„Barcamps": Popular meeting places for the Internet scene

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As with the Greens, it can be assumed that the Pirate Party has a special recruiting base, although a precise determination of its social structure has yet to be made (von Gehlen 2007; Bartels 2009; Zolleis et al. 2010; Häusler 2011; Köcher 2011). For example, Frank Schirrmacher (2011) assumes that nerds are most important for the Pirate Party. No less vaguely, one could also think of the „digital natives" (Blumberg 2010) or those who are active in the „creative industries" or are continuously founding „start ups," as they have mushroomed in the course of the last ten years: semi-professional and -commercial, increasingly also political or socio-cultural Internet projects based on Web 2. 0 technologies, often starting very small, involving only a few people, mostly young men with university degrees, living primarily in larger cities (and mostly remaining small, if they survive the first year at all). And as with the Greens, who emerged not least from the new social movements, it can also be said for the Pirate Party that certain movement-like Internet initiatives are preceding it, one need only recall the „open source" movement here (Hemetsberger 2008).

What can be said about such social networks and movements is, among other things, that for all their inconspicuousness, even invisibility, if one does not belong to them, they apparently develop a recurring need for meeting, direct encounter and exchange (Melucci 1989). Interaction, i.e. communication among those present, represents an important mechanism for the reproduction and restabilization of such networks and movements, similar to what Gerhard Schulze (1992) has described for the relationship between milieus and scenes.

One form in which this recruiting base of the Piraten Party, which is by no means merely politically motivated, comes together and exchanges ideas, according to this thesis, is „barcamps." „Barcamps" represent a relatively new form of conference that has rather unconventional rules compared to otherwise common conference formats, which is why „barcamps" are also referred to as „unconferences" (http://barcamp.org/w/page/405512/WhatToExpect).

Unconventional, for example, is how the contributions are organized: In the morning, the organizers, all volunteers, welcome the participants who have arrived, provide brief information about themselves, the location, and the organization of a „barcamp," and then immediately pass the word on to the guests.[1] Everyone who wants to, then steps forward and briefly announces who is currently speaking, on which topic he or she would like to present or learn something in the course of the day and with how many participants can be expected for the just announced session, so that the room allocation is as optimal as possible. In order to save time, usually only two or three „tags", i.e. keywords, are allowed, namely about oneself, one's own interests and what is offered or requested as a session at the respective „barcamp".

Anschließend wird das jeweilige Vorhaben auf einer Art Wandzeitung dokumentiert, die im Hauptraum hängt und auf der die Tageszeiten und verfügbaren Räumen schon zweidimensional aufgetragen wurden. Mit Beginn der Vorstellungsrunde füllt sich diese Wandzeitung innerhalb weniger Minuten mit unterschiedlichsten Themen, Fragen, Sachverhalten, jeweils auf einem DIN A 4 Blatt kurz und bündig festgehalten, anschließend auf die Wandzeitung geklebt, und je nachdem, wie viele Teilnehmer gerade anwesend sind, dauert es nicht mehr denn eine Stunde, bis die Wand weitestgehend voll ist, d. h. alle freien „slots" gefüllt sind.

Then it starts immediately, the crowd disperses, the individual rooms are visited, the „barcamp" begins to warm up. Because of this form of self-organization, „barcamps" are also referred to as „user-generated conferences", because the entire day's program is mainly provided by the participants and their contributions.

Participation in a „barcamp" is free of charge, as is catering, public use of an obligatory WLAN network and other infrastructure and technology. The number of participants is usually limited due to the spatial conditions and usually ranges between 50 and 150 people, depending on the „barcamp". The premises are sponsored, by the way, just as all other services are financed by sponsors, all of whom use the Internet for their own purposes, sometimes only additionally, sometimes exclusively.

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[1] If a „barcamp" lasts two days, as is usually the case, this ritual is repeated the following day. The session planning is always agreed upon a hoc only for the respective day, spontaneity and topicality are decisive.

Turning to the organizers and participants, there is usually a slight overhang of men in their early 20s to early 30s; only a few are significantly younger or older. The appearance is emphatically casual, the clothing likewise, the contact uncomplicated and informal. People are on first-name terms throughout, and the atmosphere is a mixture of seminar and vacation camp (http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/24/24251/1.html). This is not least due to the context in which „barcamps" originated.

Barcamps" originated in the USA in 2005, as a countermovement or further development of the This series of events, which can almost be described as legendary, has been taking place since 2003 and in which only „Friends of (Tim) O'Reilly" (hence „foo"), an open source pioneer from the San Francisco Bay Area, can take part. Most of the participants are Internet pioneers, inventors, programmers, nerds, and „Wired" authors.[2] The venue is Tim O'Reilly's farm in the north of San Francisco.

Starting with the first „barcamp" in Palo Alto, California, in August 2005, this popular version of „foo camps" has spread like wildfire around the world. In 2005, 21 documented[3] „barcamps" took place, including three outside the USA (Amsterdam, Paris, Toronto). In 2006, 169 „barcamps" were held worldwide, including three in Germany (Berlin, Hamburg, Nuremberg). For the years 2007 with 101 and 2008 with even only 97 „barcamps" worldwide this trend broke down again – although it can be said at least for the German „barcamps" that the data are definitely incomplete, since in 2008 alone more than ten „barcamps" were held in Germany. For the year 2009, however, 485 „barcamps" were registered worldwide, 44 of them in Germany, while in 2010 the number of registered „barcamps" worldwide dropped again sharply to 211, of which 45 took place in Germany. And even here, not all of the German „barcamps" that were held were included in the listing. For 2011, the number of „barcamps" held worldwide, some of which were only announced, was 185, in countries such as Argentina, Azerbaijan, China, Ecuador, India, Cameroon, Kazakhstan, Croatia, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia and Ukraine, while 19 „barcamps" were held in Germany alone. But even here the numbers are not reliable. The reason for these strong

fluctuations is a lack of discipline in the timely and accurate updating of this list: Not every „barcamp" that was held was entered correctly, and possibly not every „barcamp" that was announced was actually held.

Thereby „barcamps" are always only stopovers, mostly organized locally, with a predominantly regional catchment area. Only few develop a supraregional, sometimes even country wide attraction, to remain with Germany. Moreover, in this country, at least for some of the participants, one can speak of downright „barcamp" tourism. After all, the fluctuation is quite high.[4]

The thematic focus is mostly on the use of new media, programming languages, technologies (apps, drupal, facebook, google+, php, podcast, videos, wikis, etc.) for various purposes, where the communication among the active users of a platform is in the foreground. It is precisely these networking technologies that allow barcamp participants to stay in contact with each other between barcamps. And it is not uncommon for the reverse to happen: people observe each other via the Internet, become curious about each other over time, make contact online, and then arrange to meet at a particular barcamp to get to know each other better and exchange ideas directly. In addition, „barcamps" offer the unique opportunity to discuss the latest projects and ideas from the online world in a very inclusive, creative and critical way with experts, many of whom are committed to the „open source" philosophy, i.e. advocate transparency and free access. „BarCamp is an ad-hoc unconference born from the desire for people to share and learn in an open environment. It is an intense event with discussions, demos and interaction from attendees" (http://barcamp.org/w/page/405173/TheRulesOfBarCamp).

„Barcamps" thus function as regular meeting places for the Internet scene. They represent a very popular form of event characterized exclusively by this scene, which serves as an opportunity to meet, a discussion forum, an ideas fair and a job exchange and, not least, contributes to the formation and stabilization of the collective identity of this scene (Hellmann 2007).

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[2] Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foo_Camp; see also www.franztoo.de/?p=515 and, more recently, http://www.scottberkun.com/blog/2011/what-i-learned-at-foo-camp-11/.

[3] On the website www.barcamp.org there is a kind of announcement about all „barcamps" taking place worldwide.

The registration history goes back to 2005. However, the registration is incomplete.

[4] As far as their own experience with the „CommunityCamp-Berlin" (http://communitycamp.mixxt.de/), which has been held annually since 2008, is concerned, at least one third of the CCB participants are newcomers and often have had no experience whatsoever with other „barcamps".

The special atmosphere at „barcamps" is supported by eight rules, the observance of which was initially attempted to be strictly adhered to (http://barcamp.org/w/page/405173/TheRulesOfBarCamp).[5] These rules are:

1st rule: Talk about the barcamp.

2nd rule: Blog about the barcamp.

3rd rule: If you are present, write about the topic and present it in a presentation.

4th rule: Only three words of introduction.

5th Rule: As many presentations at the same time as space allows.

6th rule: no scheduled presentations, no tourists.

7th Rule: Presentations go on as long as they need to or until the next presentation begins.

8th Rule: If this is your first Barcamp, you MUST present. (Well, you don't HAVE to, but try to find someone to present with, or at least ask some questions and be an interactive participant).

Due to the rapid proliferation of „barcamps", which was accompanied by a significant increase in the number of participants at these initially non-thematically focused „barcamps", from 2008 onwards there has been an increasing split between the usual „barcamp" format, which is open to all topics, sometimes with several hundred participants,[6] and purely themed camps. To give just a rough overview here: In 2010, in addition to ten general „barcamps" (namely in Nuremberg, Essen, Norderney, Hanover, Konstanz, Kiel, Bielefeld, Munich, Braunschweig and Hamburg, in chronological order), the following theme camps were held in Germany, among others: fundraising2.0CAMP, Tourismuscamp 3, barcampkultur, Piratcamp, ChurchCamp, Startup Camp, Barcamp Kirche 2.0, KommunalCamp, VideoCamp, Work-Life2.0Camp, PhotoCamp, Gov20Camp, EnergyCamp, CommunityCampBerlin, Socialcamp, Creativity and Communication Camp, CollaborationCamp.[7] The following

figure shows some logos of German theme camps (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Theme camp logos from the last years

Source: own representation

To stay with an example I know well myself: The „CommunityCampBerlin", which has been taking place annually since 2008, deals with all questions concerning Internet-based „communities", with a special focus on „community building" and „community management", as long as appropriate Web 2.0 technologies are used. The sessions are primarily concerned with the exchange of community building and management experiences from various fields of application, and also with new technical possibilities that could in turn promote community building and community management. The initiatives presented are partly commercial, partly non-commercial. While one session is about skimming product ideas through customer integration or community metrics, the session next door deals with privacy issues or difficulties with netiquette compliance. There are recurring discussions on questions of visitor loyalty, member activity, different degrees of identification, recurring conflicts, the willingness of individuals to leave, existing fears of loss, criticism of companies involved in „community building," or even censorship by platform operators. Moreover, after the first „CommunityCampBerlin" in 2008, the

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[5] ... „has been attempted" because there is now very clear criticism that these eight rules are hardly ever taken seriously, cf. http://www.robertbasic.de/2011/11/entwickelt-sich-das-barcamp-format-weiter/. This is especially true for rule 6, in connection with a certain full-supply mentality that has developed over the years: Everything is for free, nobody has to do anything for it (except the Orga-Team). Being there is everything, offering your own session rather the exception, with a very high no show rate.

[6] In 2008, for example, more than 700 participants gathered on the first day of Barcamp Berlin 3, the largest „barcamp" ever held in Germany, cf. http://www.focus.de/finanzen/karriere/perspektiven/informationszeitalter/tid-12960/barcamp-pause-als-programm_aid_357743.html. For many, a limit of what was reasonable had thus been reached. Since then, „barcamps" have hardly comprised more than 200 participants, rather less, shrunk to normal size, so to speak.

[7] Cf. http://barcamp.org/w/page/401344/BarCampPastEvents, again arranged chronologically.

Bundesverband Community Managment e.V. (BVCM) was spontaneously founded, more and more experienced „community managers" are appearing, i.e. practitioners and experts in the management of social networks whose existence is largely due to the Internet.

As far as the future of „barcamps" is concerned, it can no longer be denied that the culture of these „unconferences" has maneuvered itself into a kind of legitimation crisis. The initial euphoria is over. It is true that new participants are joining all the time. But the spirit of optimism has gradually faded. The initial desire to participate is giving way to an increasing need to consume. Andrew Keen (2007) criticized this very sharply with regard to the general Web 2.0 euphoria.

It is possible that we are dealing here with a completely normal process of disenchantment. The only question that arises for the Pirate Party, to return to the starting point, is whether such a form of institutionalization, as Dieter Rucht, Barbara Blattert and Dieter Rink (1997) have described for alternative culture, could also occur for them.[8] For the Greens, this has long been foreseeable (Hellmann 2002). At present, the Pirate Party is still a long way off. The first task will be to enter all parliaments, state parliaments and city halls nationwide. In the course of this development, however, it will be inevitable that the Pirate Party, as in the case of the „barcamp" culture, will lose ground, will have to show its colors, and will gradually lose its fascination value – unless it succeeds, and this also applies to the „barcamp" culture, in initiating a co-evolution for itself that keeps pace with the change to which it is continuously exposed, not least through itself.

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[8] This can already be observed to some extent at PolitCamp (http://politcamp.org), which has been held since 2009 and for whose ongoing organization an association was founded in August 2011. The procedure, structure and process of the Politcamp are similar to barcamp, as can be seen in a report by the Young Pirates (http://www.junge-piraten.de/2010/03/23/junge-piraten-entern-politcamp/). With about 1,000 participants, however, the PolitCamp goes beyond the usual barcamp framework, and the number of 35 featured „speakers" is also a foreign element to barcamp; it is more reminiscent of the format of the re:publica (http://re-publica.de/12/). Nevertheless, this indicates that the barcamp culture has also spread into the political sphere, and the presence of the Young Pirates apparently gave the PolitCamp 2011 a special moment of authenticity (http://www.indiskretionehrensache.de/2010/03/unter-polit-campern/).

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