

## THE BARCAMP MOVEMENT. REPORT ABOUT A SERIES OF „UNCONFERENCES“

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On November 3rd and 4th the „BarCampBerlin2“ took place in Berlin. It was the second event of this kind in Berlin, after the first Berlin Barcamp from September 30 to October 1, 2006 – hence the „2“. But what does „Barcamp“ mean and what happens at a „Barcamp“?

„Barcamp“ represents a new form of conference that has rather un-conventional rules for other conferences, which is why barcamps are also called „unconferences“. Unconventional is, for example, how the contributions are organized: On the first day of a barcamp, the organizers welcome the participants who have arrived, briefly inform them about the location and schedule, and then immediately pass the floor to the guests. Everyone who wants to, then steps forward and briefly announces to everyone who is speaking and on which topic he or she would like to present or learn something in the course of the next two days. Afterwards the respective intention is written on a white sheet of paper and this is stuck on a large wall in the main room, on which the times of day and available rooms are already drawn in two dimensions. Within a few minutes, the wall fills up in this way with a wide variety of questions, and depending on how many participants are present at the time, it hardly takes more than half an hour until the wall is completely full. Then it starts immediately, the crowd disperses, the individual rooms are visited, the „barcamp“ begins to warm up. In this sense, barcamps are also called „user generated conferences“.

Participation in barcamps is free of charge, as are catering, public use of a WLAN network (WiFi) and other technology, although only a limited number of participants are usually admitted due to the spatial conditions. In Berlin, for example, around 400 and 300 people respectively were present on the two days. As many as 500 registered, including a double-digit number of foreign visitors. Incidentally, the premises were sponsored, just as all other services were financed by sponsors.

Turning to the organizers and participants, there was obviously a slight overhang of men in their early 20s to early 30s, only a few were significantly younger or older. The demeanor was emphatically relaxed, the interaction uncomplicated, people were on first-

name terms throughout, the language of the presentations in Berlin was often English because of the foreign guests, and the atmosphere was a mixture of seminar and party.

The topics were from different areas, but they all had in common a special affinity to the Internet and new media, and communication is mostly via „Twitter“ (elektrischer-reporter.de/index.php/site/film/52/), because it is cheaper than SMS. Among others, the following topics were offered: „Web 2.0 and e-learning“, „Web to China“, „Typo 3 – Why the hype?“, „Enterprise 2.0“, „Future of Weblogs“, „Identity, Privacy & Open ID“, „The Next Web“, „Corporate Podcasting“, „Russian Web“, „Designing Websites for Devices“, „Sustainability Interfaces“, „Google Earth the Geo Browser“, „Lessons in Social Software“, „Foster International Barcamps“, „Socialcamp“, „Commercial Communities“ and many more.

Present were start-up founders, programmers, system administrators, bloggers, podcasters, students of business informatics and business administration, a bit of press as well as some laymen and job seekers, because barcamps offer the possibility to make job offers and job requests public through a kind of wall newspaper.

If one considers the „BarCampBerlin2“ only for itself, so to speak as an isolated event, the question may arise for which reason it is reported in the research journal *New Social Movements*. Because in terms of content, none of the articles dealt with social movements. If, on the other hand, one looks at this event as a link in a chain of similar events, namely the planning and implementation of a rapidly increasing number of barcamps since 2005, then this event can certainly be seen – pars pro toto – as an expression of a global social movement. However, this presupposes that such an event is embedded in an appropriate environment with the help of suitable explanatory approaches. For such an analysis of exactly this event as a „bridgehead“ of a social movement of ongoing barcamps all over the world, the work of Alberto Melucci offers itself in terms of movement theory.

### Latent Networks and Manifest Mobilization

In the 1985 article „The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements,“ Melucci put forward a model of social movements whose distinctive feature was that social movements were essentially understood as

„movement networks or movement areas as the network of groups and individuals sharing a conflictual culture and a collective identity. This definition included „not only 'formal' organizations but the network of 'informal' relationships connecting core individuals and groups to a broader area of participants and 'users' of services and cultural goods produced by the movement“.

At the center of this approach, then, is the „submerged network“ of social movements, conceived as a „system of exchange (persons and information circulate along the network; some agencies, such as local free radios, bookshops, magazines provide a certain unity).“ Of course, such a „submerged network“ is mostly invisible to the general public, only direct participants know about it, otherwise this network remains hidden. From time to time, however, sometimes even on a regular basis, there are arranged meetings, larger numbers of people meet in certain places, even if only for a few hours, in order to strengthen the mutual bond between the network members through direct interaction, to get to know each other better, to exchange ideas and to undertake joint actions.

Melucci has now aptly captured this constant interplay between being dispersed and coming together with the distinction latency/visibility. The temporal, spatial, and societal normal state of a social movement is thus the rather inconspicuous network of activists, supporters, and sympathizers, accessible and tangible only to insiders. At certain intervals, however, this network transforms into a form that is also visible from the outside, which is then observed and described as a social movement in motion, as one might say here.

## Social software and the barcamp scene

Exactly this phenomenology now also applies to barcamps. Originating in 2005 as a counter-movement to the Foo Camps, a series of events in which only 'Friends of (Tim) O'Reilly', an open source pioneer from the San Francisco Bay Area ([franztoo.de/?p=515](http://franztoo.de/?p=515)), could participate (hence the abbreviation „Foo“), kept very elitist and only accessible to Internet thought leaders and inventors by personal invitation from Tim O'Reilly, this popular version of Foo Camps has spread like wildfire around the world. In 2005, after the first barcamp in Palo Alto at the end of August, other barcamps were held in Amsterdam, Seattle, Toronto and Paris. In 2006, there were already 90 barcamps worldwide, including in Amsterdam, Bangalore, Berlin,

Dharamsala, Durban, Hamburg, Cologne, Krakow, London, Nuremberg, Shanghai, Turin, Vienna and Zurich, and this year the number has already reached 180 barcamp meetings, with 12 more to follow by the end of the year, all of which will take place worldwide. And planning for next year is already underway ([barcamp.org](http://barcamp.org)). Yet these barcamps are always just stopovers, mostly organized locally. The thematic focus is on the use of new media and „social software“, where the communication among the active users of a platform is in the foreground, and it is precisely this „social software“ that allows barcamp participants to stay in contact with each other between barcamps – although it is actually the other way around: As a rule, barcamp participants observe each other via the Internet, they often know each other before a barcamp meeting, become curious about each other over time and then seek the proximity of familiar Internet partners at barcamps. In addition, barcamps offer unique opportunities to exchange concrete projects and ideas: „BarCamp is an ad-hoc gathering 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 participants.“ ([barcamp.org](http://barcamp.org))

The special atmosphere at barcamps is supported by eight rules, the observance of which is strictly adhered to. These rules are:

- 1st Rule: You do talk about Bar Camp.
- 2nd Rule: You do blog about Bar Camp.
- 3rd Rule: If you want to present, you must write your topic and name in a presentation slot.
- 4th Rule: Only three word intros.
- 5th Rule: As many presentations at a time as facilities allow for.
- 6th Rule: No pre-scheduled presentations, no tourists.
- 7th Rule: Presentations will go on as long as they have to or until they run into another presentation slot.
- 8th Rule: If this is your first time at BarCamp, you HAVE to present. (Ok, you don't really HAVE to, but try to find someone to present with, or at least ask questions and be an interactive participant).

Barcamps thus function as regular meeting points of the barcamp scene, they represent a very popular form of event, characterized exclusively by this scene,

which not only serves as an opportunity to meet, discussion forum and trade fair, but thereby also contributes to the formation and stabilization of the collective identity of this scene.

Certainly, it is problematic to describe the unity of this Internet and barcamp scene as a social movement, if the existence of a „conflictual culture“, as applied by Melucci and all other movement researchers, is set as a *conditio sine non qua*. For the potential for conflict at bar camps is comparatively low and in the majority not directed at protest against social conditions, at least not explicitly (special attention is paid to topics such as data protection, copyright and informal self-determination).

But if one distances oneself from this and thinks of culture-oriented movements, for example, as Joachim Raschke („Soziale Bewegungen“ from 1985) calls them – for example, the alternative movement („Wer soll das alles ändern. Die Alternativen der Alternativbewegung“ by Joseph Huber 1981) –, then the parallels and similarities are astonishing. And it is not even proven that the actionism of this scene will not one day have political effects, just think of „Moveon.Org“ (moveon.org) or „Free Burma! (free-burma.org). „When you come, be prepared to share with barcampers. When you leave, be prepared to share it with the world.“ (barcamp.org/TheRulesOfBarCamp)

Be that as it may: With the emergence and worldwide spread of barcamps, not only has a new conference form emerged, but even more so, a scene has become visible that, in its mode of communication, its lifestyle, and its worldview, certainly has approaches to speak of a social movement, as Franz Patzig (franztoo.de/?p=113) has done. It is possible that the Barcamp movement is only a temporary phenomenon, just like all other movements. However, or even if this parallel should still be true, it would perhaps be worth considering, despite certain difficulties in accepting such a supposedly completely apolitical project and life context as the social software scene as a social movement, to take a closer look at this phenomenon – in the case of the right-wing violence in the 1990s, after all, it took a certain amount of time until movement research was willing to clarify whether and to what extent this was a new social movement, and the indications and findings at that time were quite positive. Maybe it will be the same with the barcamps, let's wait and see.

## Impressum

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