Making the Case for Anonymity in E-Participation[1]

An Evaluation of Real Name Policy in Gütersloh's Second Participatory Budget

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Abstract: *The paper relates the debate about real name policy on social networking platforms and online forums to online moderated consultation processes in the area of e-participation. It analyses the case of the second participatory budget of the German city of Gütersloh. Three major rationales for real name policy in e-participatory projects are identified: the possibility to restrict access, prevention of offensive communication, and the strengthening of a transparent democracy. The five major objections identified are: distraction from issue-related dialogue, violation of privacy rights, administrative problems causing high expenditure of time and costs, negative media and public attention, and usability problems that may result in a low rate of participation. The evidence found indicates that the negative consequences of real name policy outweigh the positive ones. Important directions of further research are pointed out. The paper is an extended version of a paper presented at the Conference for E-Democracy and Open Government in 2012.* [1]

F**acebook has it, Google+ is abandoning it**, Hans-Peter Friedrich - German Federal Minister of the Interior - wants it, the online community is divided about it: Real name policy, i.e. the obligation of users to register on an online platform with their real name, often connected with a request for personal data, has triggered intensive debate not only in the year 2011. In fact, the discussion about the advantages and limitations of anonymity on the Web is as old as the Internet itself – and even older if looking at anonymity in offline[2] contexts. The pros and cons are manifold, and the discussion comes in waves, often triggered by a recent event such as the introduction of real name policy by Google+, which has already been softened due to extensive protests about it. However, so far the question of online anonymity has almost exclusively centred on social networks and unmoderated online forums. The area of e-participation has to date remained largely unexplored in connection with anonymity and real name policy. Therefore, the present paper sets out to relate the 'anonymity debate' explicitly to e-participation, i.e. "the participation of individuals and legal entities (including groups thereof) in political and administrative decision-making processes by means of information and communication technology (ICT)" (Albrecht et al., 2008, p. 4). Drawing on the case of the participatory budget[3] in Gütersloh, a German municipality which

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[1] This paper is an updated and extended version of Ruesch & Märker's (2012) "Real Name Policy in E-Participation: The case of Gütersloh's second participatory budget" which was originally presented at the Conference for E-Democracy and Open Government (CeDEM) on May 3, 2012.

[2] We acknowledge the problematic notion of the word 'offline' which implies a dichotomy to 'online' and which is often associated with a temporary state of not being online. However, the notions 'face-to-face' or 'real life' are just as problematic. Hence, the decision was made to use the word 'offline'.

[3] In Germany, participatory budgeting is implemented in the form of consultation processes in which citizens can voice their suggestions on how to allocate a municipal or public budget. Their input is collected, reviewed and decided upon by the city or public institution (Märker & Wehner, 2011).

introduced real name policy in 2011, the paper discusses major advantages and limitations of real name policy and request for personal data regarding e-participatory projects. Although the case study based nature of this paper does not allow for generalizations, it still provides some strong indications that real name policy should be avoided in e-participation projects, and that negative effects of anonymity can be sufficiently accounted for by the use of pseudonyms and moderation.

The paper is written from the position of practitioners with longstanding experience in the field of e-participation, having consulted a large variety of bigger and smaller cities.[4] In Gütersloh, Zebralog (www.zebralog.de) provided the platform and advised the city on its online consultation process, including the question of whether real names and personal data should be requested from citizens when registering. In the first section of this paper, the debate about real name policy in social networks and unmoderated forums will briefly be outlined. Second will be an examination of the differences between such spaces compared to online moderated consultation platforms as in the case of e-participation. Thereafter, a description of the Gütersloh case study will follow, setting the ground for the fourth part, namely a discussion of the core positions on real name policy from the perspective of administration, politicians, citizens and practitioners in the Gütersloh case. Preliminary observations and lessons learnt regarding the different rationales and objections will be presented, and some indications for the negative relationship between the request for real names and the rate of participation will be discussed. Overall, the paper is both a plea for anonymity in e-participation, and a call for further research on the topic.

1. The Debate About Anonymity and Real Name Policy on the Web

What some see as a newly gained freedom is seen by others as dangerous and harmful; anonymity on the Web has been subject of controversial debate. Of course, anonymity has existed much longer than the Internet; as a sub-category of anonymity, pseudonyms, i.e. 'false names' have always been used in the course of history, be it by authors, artists or whistle-blowers. However, the Internet has made it much easier to communicate messages without revealing one's name or personal attributes. Hand-in-hand goes the increasing ease to have and live 'multiple identities', depending on where and with whom communication takes place (Moreira, Möller, Gerhardt & Ladner, 2009). On the other hand, the introduction of real name policy by many forums and social networks and the merging of several platforms into one universal account can be read as signs for a trend towards identification with one's real name (Herbold, 2011). In the following, the core lines of argument of the different positions will be outlined. It should be kept in mind that these positions are not related to e-participation procedures but mostly focus on social networks and online forums.

1.1.   Arguments in Favour of Real Name Policy

One of the strongest and most persistent arguments of the proponents of real name policy is the negative effect of anonymity on the quality of discourse, subsequently called the *self-control argument*. This is also the official explanation of Google+ and Facebook for their real name policy (Beuth, 2011[5]). Such arguments are often backed up by experimental research in the field of social psychology (e.g. Döring, 1998; Joinson, McKenna, Postmes & Reips, 2009) as well as by content analyses of online forums in the field of media studies (e.g. Wilhelm, 2000; Gerstenfeld, Grant & Chiang, 2003). Since it would go beyond the scope of this paper to examine these studies in detail, it shall suffice here to note that there is strong evidence for the thesis that anonymous communication tends to cause more offensive communication; real name policy in turn facilitates

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[4] See for example www.aachen-rechnet-mit-ihnen.de (Aachen), www.ffm.de (Frankfurt am Main), www.solingen-spart.de (Solingen), www.ezuerich.ch (Zürich), and www.koeln-aktiv-gegen-laerm.de (Cologne).

[5] Beuth (2011) however suggests that the unofficial explanation is that making money with advertisement is only possible when people can be identified.

civilized communication. Being identifiable by others seems to encourage self-control, decrease personal defamation and thus facilitate the creation of "communities of trust" (Fake, 2011).

Closely related to the self-control argument is the *legal argument*. Brought forward for example by an Irish data protection specialist who defends Facebook's real name policy (Lischka, 2011), the legal argument stresses that anonymity can be used to protect criminal acts, ranging from personal defamation to watching children pornography (Palme & Berglund, 2004). For this reason, real name policy was compulsory for South Korean websites with more than 100,000 visitors until recently. As Cho (2011) explains, the South Korean policy goal of the Real Name Verification Law, introduced in 2007, was "to prevent widespread online abuse in postings and comments that can seriously cause privacy invasion and personal defamation by legal enforcement and penalties" (p. 3). Proponents of real name policy thus point to the importance of clearly identifiable profiles in order to be able to hold Internet users legally accountable for their words and deeds.

A third major argument advanced by proponents of real name policy is the *online=offline argument*: If we are accountable with our real names offline, why should we not have the same rule online? This line of argument was supported by German Federal Minister of the Interior Hans-Peter Friedrich, even though he later admitted that anonymity in online spaces may sometimes be necessary (Sueddeutsche.de, August 08, 2011). In fact, three implicit presumptions of the online=offline argument can be discerned: First, the belief that the Internet is so closely interwoven with our offline world that the virtual and the analogue are one. Internet enthusiasts often refer to this as 'augmented reality' (see e.g. Raphael, 2011). Second is the supposition that humans have or should have one single identity rather than multiple identities (Moreira, Möller, Gerhardt & Ladner, 2009). Third is the assumption that efforts should be taken to make the online world imitate the offline world, not acknowledging the new opportunities that can arise out of the new medium.

Overall, Newton's (2011) comment sums up well the predominant opinion of many anonymity opponents: "Anonymous commenting in civic forums encourages our worst instincts. It weakens all fact-based brands. And allowing it is just unethical."

1.2.   Arguments Against Real Name Policy

However, opponents of real name policy point to several problems that come along when having to register with one's real name. Before outlining the opponents' core arguments, it should be noted that opponents of real name policy are by no means necessarily in favour of complete anonymity. In fact, there are various 'compromises' between anonymous communication and real name policy, ranging from no registration at all (complete anonymity) over registration with pseudonyms, registration with real but unverified name or registration with hidden real name plus pseudonym, to registration with verified name and possibly also personal data. For this paper, pseudonymity is understood as a sub-category of anonymity.

One of the strongest arguments against real name policy is what we shall refer to as the *open participation argument*, namely the belief that forcing users to provide their real name will exclude many from participating in the forum or social network. This case is probably most clear when looking at authoritarian regimes where real name policy will exclude anyone who is critical of the government. For example, for reasons of security, Chinese journalist Jing Zhao has been fighting for his right to use the name 'Michael Anti' on Facebook (Biermann, 2011). However, the argument does not stop at authoritarian regimes and political activists. Based on a survey of Australian blogger Skud (2011) who asked Google+ users for their reasons why they do not want to register with their real name, Internet researcher Danah Boyd (2011) discovered that real names are mainly a barrier for vulnerable groups of society such as victims of crime and abuse, homosexuals, women and young people. These groups usually feel more secure when using a pseudonym. Ruesch, Basedow and Korte (2012) therefore suggest "to abstain to some degree from transparency for the sake of inclusiveness" (p. 260). In general, anonymity and pseudonymity are seen to provide more open and equal participation as they do not reveal information such as gender, and put the message rather than the person at the centre.

Secondly, an argument that is closely related to the first one is the *freedom argument*. It maintains that users are able to speak more freely and less self-censored and coloured by groupthink or, as the US Supreme Court remarked, by the 'tyranny of the masses', when not having to reveal their real identity (York, 2011). This argument can be seen as 'the other side' of the self-control argument, demonstrating that more freedom through anonymity may lead to increased defamation and offensiveness just as well as to more honesty due to reduced fear of speaking-up. Proponents of this line of argumentation stress that "pseudonyms are not in themselves harmful. Yes, they can be used for harm, as when people use them for slanderous attacks, trolling, etc., but in the fast majority of cases there is no harm done" (Fake, 2011). Interestingly, the South Korean Real Name Verification Law was recently rejected by the South Korean Constitutional Court. It said that the law violated the right to free speech, and that there was not enough evidence that it prevented malicious comments (Sang-Hun, 2012). As opposed to the online=offline argument, the freedom argument values the newly gained possibilities of the Internet as distinct from the offline world. Moreover, it points to the fact that anonymous participation also exists in conventional participation methods such as in the case of big public information and participation events. According to this view, the Internet provides a space for people to live the multiple identities they have, giving them the chance to creatively explore different roles (Enno Park cited in Fischermann, 2011). There is even some evidence that the quality of pseudonymous comments is higher than comments by completely anonymous users or users with real names (Knoke, 2012). The position is also nicely demonstrated by a user's comment on an article in the Sueddeutsche Newspaper, noting that German schlager singer Roy Black was not a coward only because he did not use his real name Gerhard Höllerich ('rheinelbe' in Sueddeutsche.de, 2011).

Next is the *privacy argument*, which is advanced for example by the German Pirate Party who claims privacy and by extension anonymity to be a basic digital human right in a democracy (Sueddeutsche.de, 2011). This position draws attention to problems of data privacy (Datenschutz) with regard to real name policy and the request for personal data. In fact, there is a considerable amount of literature today which suggests ways how to google one's neighbour or job candidate (e.g. Goldman & Borchewski, 2008). Technological innovations such as automatic face recognition on photos make it even easier to find data about persons who appear online under their real name (Lischka, 2011). According to the privacy argument, Internet users must have the right to decide if certain political or other opinions are to be openly accessible, especially regarding the fact that the spread of information is almost not controllable once published on the Net.

Last not least is the argument that real name policy is in practice not feasible due to immense logistical consequences that are costly and time-consuming. This *practicability argument* has been advanced for example by the German Free Democratic Party (FDP) as a response to Hans-Peter Friedrich's offline=online argument (Sueddeutsche.de, 2011). Also stressed by the practicability argument are the problems with registration that are the consequence of real name policy, such as in the case of author Ahmed Rushdie whose Facebook account was blocked because he had used his second name, Salman, instead of his first name, Ahmed (Beuth, 2011). Moreover, at least in the case of real name policy which does not use time-intensive verification methods like the German PostIdent, real name policy may increase the risk of identity theft, i.e. of users registering under an existing name that is not theirs (Moreira, Möller, Gerhardt & Ladner, 2009).

1.3.   Anonymity and Real Name Policy in E-Participation

As mentioned above, the debate about real name policy and the request for personal data has so far predominantly centred on social networks and online forums. From time to time, blogs are mentioned, too. However, apart from rare exceptions such as a study on the South Korean Real Name Verification Law (Cho, 2011), there is a striking lack of research on this topic in the area of e-participation, even though the question of real name policy is almost always a topic when a city, ministry or public institution introduces e-participatory projects such as online moderated consultation platforms (Märker, 2006). While most of these projects to date still allow for anonymous or pseudonymous participation, at least in Germany, some platforms that explicitly

seek to promote e-participation, such as www.e-democracy.org, have decided to make real names compulsory in their forums. Their argument in short: "Real people, real debate, real democracy" (Newton, 2011). More explicitly, the argument is that meaningful deliberation can only happen when there is full transparency about who is talking. However, other projects in the area of e-participation explicitly cite anonymity as one of the reasons for the project's success and high rate of participation, as in the case of the UK Online Parliamentary Inquiry into Domestic Violence in 2000 (OECD, 2003). Acknowledging the distinct characteristics of online moderated consultation platforms, the lack of scholarly debate and research in this area cannot be compensated by debates on social networks and online forums.

One core difference between online social networks and online moderated consultation platforms is their *purpose*. While the main function of social networks is to facilitate the connection between friends, the purpose of online moderated consultation platforms is (or at least should be) to seek the expertise and ideas of citizens and to obtain a picture of the general opinion — or of those who are affected by planning and decision processes — regarding certain policies (Albrecht et al., 2008). It is generally acknowledged that participatory projects are only successful if all citizens or stakeholders have the chance to voice their opinion and ideas. It is hence reasonable to argue that while *persons* are the centre of social networks, *messages* are at the heart of e-participatory projects. The focus on rationale, issue-centred dialogue in online consultations is also illustrated by efforts to visualize and structure argumentation, such as computer supported cooperative argumentation (CSCA) and computer supported argumenation visualization (CSAV) (Gordon, 1996; Buckinghum Shum, Uren, Gangmin, Domingue & Motta, 2003).

Secondly, another key difference of online moderated consultation platforms as opposed to social networks is their explicit *call for expression of opinion on political topics*. On Facebook or Google+, users can choose to only use private messaging for content they do not want others to read. On online consultation platforms, the sole way of participating is usually through public commenting or voting.

A third unique characteristic of online consultation platforms is their *limited time period*. Most participatory platforms are only open for participation for three to five weeks. This in turn has important consequences in that it is possible (and common) to provide moderation on the platform which ensures that comments do not violate the platform's netiquette (Albrecht, 2008). In contrast, for online forums that are not limited in time, moderation is usually too costly. Furthermore, the limited time span of consultation processes also means that some users will only visit the site once, while social networks and unmoderated forums are often used more regularly.

Having demonstrated why real name policy in e-participation deserves scholarly attention and why it is necessary to distinguish between different kinds of online spaces, the next section will introduce the online moderated consultation process for Gütersloh's participatory budget 2012.

2. Gütersloh's Second Internet-supported Participatory Budget

2.1. The Participatory Process of Gütersloh's Online Consultation 2011

The German city of Gütersloh introduced its first participatory budget in 2011 (http://2011.buergerhaushalt.guetersloh.de). For the first time, citizens could make their voice heard online regarding the allocation of the public budget of 2011. While the first Internet-supported consultation allowed citizens to participate anonymously, Gütersloh made the provision of real names and personal data compulsory for participation in the consultation process for the participatory budget 2012 (www.buergerhaushalt.guetersloh.de). In both of Gütersloh's participatory budgets, Zebralog provided political consultation as well as the online platform which was developed in cooperation with the Fraunhofer Institute and has already been used in the cities of Cologne, Aachen, Frankfurt and Essen. The online platform was the central medium of the online-moderated consultation process.

The consultation process for the participatory budget 2012 was divided into two online phases. In the first phase, which took place from September 9 to 25, 2011, citizens were invited to comment on proposals made by the city or by citizens as well as to submit their own proposals. Unlike in the first participatory budget, the option to vote for proposals was not available in this first phase. Subsequent to the first phase, the city's administration department submitted its advisory opinion regarding the proposals to the Budget Committee (Hauptausschuss) which selected the most interesting proposals for the second phase, in which citizens could vote for proposals from November 7 to 25, 2011 (Bürgerhaushalt Gütersloh, 2011a). From the 111 proposals submitted in the first phase, 44 proposals were selected by the Budget Committee (Bürgerhaushalt Gütersloh, 2011b). For all other proposals, short explanations of why they were not considered for the participatory budget 2012 were published on the online consultation platform. All proposals of the second phase together with the voting results will also be considered by the city council (Rat) and its commissions (Ausschüsse) in spring 2012 when they will decide on the budget 2012.

Compared to Gütersloh's first participatory budget as well as participatory budgets in other cities, the second participatory budget only attracted a very limited, rather disappointing number of participants, with 4,918 visitors on the site, 418 registered users, 5,232 votes, and 264 commentaries (as on November 25, 2011, Bürgerhaushalt Gütersloh, 2011c). The second consultation process had already been heavily criticized in the run-up to the online consultation, and has received further criticism during and afterwards (Kosbab, 2011; Demokratie Wagen, 2011a). One heavily debated difference compared to the first participatory budget has been Gütersloh's real name policy and its request for personal data.

2.2.   Technical Specifications and Registration Procedure

Due to pressure from the side of the citizen initiative Demokratie Wagen, the concerns of the Data Protection Officer (Landesdatenschutzbeauftragter) of North Rheine-Westphalia and the strong recommendation by Zebralog and the administrative department to abandon the quest for real names, Gütersloh agreed on some compromises to their original plan of complete visibility of real names and the compulsory request for personal data including passport numbers (Stadt Gütersloh, 2011a & 2011b). The ultimate technical specifications and registration procedure looked as following: In order to register, citizens had to provide their real name and surname, a valid e-mail address, telephone number, place and date of birth. With the help of software provided by Infokom Gütersloh which linked the platform with data from the Gütersloh registration office, name and personal data were subject to a validity check (Stadt Gütersloh, 2011c). The administrative department contacted citizens in cases where no correlation could be established. For evaluation, the data were anonymized. (Bürgerhaushalt Gütersloh, 2011d).

One of the major compromises that Gütersloh agreed on was the possibility for citizens to choose an invented pseudonym under which proposals and comments were visible for non-registered Internet users. Registered users, however, could identify the citizen's real name by accessing his or her profile. This feature enabled registered users to find out who the originator of a proposal or comment was, but it prevented citizens' real names from appearing on search engines such as google. Unlike commenting and submission of proposals, the voting feature was kept anonymous (Bürgerhaushalt Gütersloh, 2011a).

3. Lessons from the Gütersloh Case: A Plea Against Real Name Policy

In order to shed some light on the advantages and limitations of real name policy in the case of Gütersloh's second participatory budget, this section will first outline the rationale of why real name policy and the request for personal data was applied. Secondly, the major objections will be outlined. Finally, the Gütersloh online consultation process of 2011 (in the lead up to the participatory budget 2012) will be analysed according to the different arguments. Preliminary observations regarding the usefulness of real name policy and the request for personal data in e-participatory projects will be pointed out.

3.1.   The Rationale for Real Name Policy in Gütersloh's Second Participatory Budget

The decision to make registration with real names and personal data compulsory was taken in the Budget Committee (Hauptausschuss) on July 4, 2011, despite intense debate preceding the decision. While the citizen initiative Demokratie Wagen, the administration department and the external consultants Zebralog all strongly advised to abstain from real name policy and the compulsory indication of personal data, the majority of the political parties voted in favour of real names and personal data.[6] The official reasons, as can be extracted from the protocol of the meeting (Stadt Gütersloh, 2011d) as well as from various discussions prior to the meeting between Zebralog, the administration and the political representatives are the following:

The probably most-used argument by political representatives in favour of real name policy was that it would ensure that only citizens from Gütersloh participate in the consultation process. According to Wolfgang Büscher (FDP), the pressure to act, which stems from citizens' proposals, could only be justified if those proposals were submitted by citizens from Gütersloh. According to this view, the participatory budget would lose its legitimacy if it does not solely represent the opinion of the citizens of Gütersloh but also includes opinions from non-Gütersloh citizens. According to this *legitimacy argument*, real name policy ensures representativeness on the one hand because only citizens of Gütersloh participate and on the other hand because manipulations of the results such as multiple registrations of one user under different names are no longer possible.

> ➔ **Rationale 1:** *Real name policy and request for personal data ensure that only citizens from Gütersloh participate, thereby enhancing representativeness and in turn legitimacy.*

Secondly, another widely used argument concerned the quality of the discourse that could arguably be enhanced due to real name policy. Heiner Kollmeyer (CDU), for example, underlined the fact that citizens' discussions in the first participatory budget had been too heated and offensive in the eyes of many, notably regarding the topic of municipal fire brigades. Real name policy in the second online consultation process would ensure that citizens feel responsible for their words and cannot hide behind a pseudonym. This argument very much resembles the above outlined *self-control argument*. Interestingly, the legal argument regarding the possibility of sanctioning was hardly mentioned.

> ➔ **Rationale 2:** *Real name policy and request for personal data ensure a high quality of dialogue by preventing offensive comments from anonymous citizens.*

In the context of e-participation, the self-control argument is often brought forward in connection with the argument that democracy is strengthened due to transparent communication with real names. This *democracy argument* has also been stressed in the case of Gütersloh, among others by Peter Kalley (UWG). Dr. Thomas Foerster (CDU) also suggested that real names will lead to "more clarity", a statement that is closely related to the strong wish of political representatives in Gütersloh to be able to talk to the citizens 'eye to eye' and to know who they are talking to. In a sense, this argument also relates to the above mentioned online=offline argument; the lack of control in the online media logic is not appreciated. According to this position, politicians should know who they are representing, and if politicians have to account for their words and deeds with their real name, there is no reason why citizens should be granted the right to hide. This line of argumentation is also similar to blogger Michael Spreng's (2011) opinion that in free and democratic societies, anonymity is only for cowardly persons.

> ➔ **Rationale 3:** *Real name policy and request for personal data ensure transparent communication, thereby strengthening democracy.*

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[6] The decision was based on 9 Yes votes (6 CDU, 1 BfGT, 1 FDP, 1 UWG), 8 No votes (4 SPD, 2 Grüne, 1 DIE LINKE, 1 major) and 0 abstentions (Stadt Gütersloh, 2011c).

3.2. Major Objections Against Real Name Policy in Gütersloh's Second Participatory Budget

However, not everyone shared the enthusiasm for real names and personal data. Zebralog, the administrative department and the citizen initiative Demokratie Wagen pointed out some serious objections against these plans and stressed the likelihood of such verified registration procedures to discredit the whole participation process.

First of all, closely related to the freedom argument, Marco Mantovanelli (Grüne) and Christine Lang from the administrative department underlined the fact that the core purpose of participatory budgeting is supposed to be *issue-related* dialogue with the *content* at the centre. Real names, they feared, would distract from a content-based discussion. Contrary to the proponents of real name policy, the opponents thus raised concerns that real names may not enhance but *degrade* the quality of discourse due to biased perception of the messages and obstacles to free speech. Knopp (2011b) gave the simple example of someone wanting to raise dog licence fees who would probably not dare to speak up if his/her dog-owning neighbours can identify him. Pointing to sites like WikiLeaks and GuttenPlag, she stressed that "freedom implies courage, anonymity implies freedom" (Demokratie Wagen, 2011b). According to the administrative department of Gütersloh, anonymity would be an "important signal to the participants" that the most crucial is their argumentation and their voice, not the person and their political affiliation (Stadt Gütersloh, 2011b). Thomas Ostermann (SPD) furthermore pointed out that by far the majority of online discussions during the first participatory budget were factual and peaceful, and only the discussion about the municipal fire brigade required rather strong moderation.

➔ *Objection 1: Real name policy and request for personal data distract from issue-related dialogue and thus degrade the quality of discourse due to biased, person-focused perception of messages.*

Moreover, attention was called to *legal problems,* notably to clashes with data privacy (Datenschutz) and the German Telemedia Act (Telemediengesetz). When asked for an evaluation of real name policy and request for personal data in Gütersloh, the Data Protection Officer of North Rheine-Westphalia critiqued the request for identity and passport numbers but saw the request for other personal data as unproblematic, given that users would be asked to agree to these terms and conditions. Nevertheless, Manfred Reese (DIE LINKE) took up the privacy argument and stressed that everyone should have the right to decide whether to provide one's real name or not. There is a reason why elections are generally anonymous, and there is also a reason why anonymous feedback boxes are widely used across companies and organisations. Knopp (2011a) stressed that anonymity is a fundamental right of citizens as only anonymity can ensure that critique can be expressed without fear and that the political affiliation of citizens is treated as a private matter, at least as long as they wish so.

➔ *Objection 2: Real name policy and request for personal data violate citizens' right to privacy.*

Besides objections related to data privacy, Zebralog and the administrative department also raised their concerns regarding considerable *administrative problems*. Acknowledging that conscious, criminal abuse – such as in the case of identity theft – is very difficult to detect, both because it may have been an unintended incorrect entry and because the real owner of the name needs to get in touch with the administration and prove his/her identity, it is very likely that some abuses will not be detected or that some unintended incorrect entries will be falsely labelled as abuse. Sanctioning in the form of blocking comments or proposals brings about the risk of being accused of censorship and may inhibit the image of the administration as neutral towards the contents of the participatory budget. Moreover, the likelihood of problems with registration and unintended incorrect entries (for example in the case of spelling mistakes or incoherency between used names and names in the passport) is likely to have considerable consequences for the time and efforts that have to be invested by the administration. Accordingly, the high expenditure of time combined with the necessity for more elaborate and complex technology result in higher costs for the consultation process. In addition, another consequence may be higher expectations of the

participating citizens and hence increasing pressure to implement citizens' suggestions. This, however, clashes with the consultative nature of German participatory budgets and the prevailing decision-making power of the municipal council (Rat).

➔ **Objection 3:** *Real name policy and request for personal data cause time- and cost-intensive administrative problems.*

Taken together, legal, administrative and usability problems may have considerable *negative consequences on media attention*, and by extension thus also on public perception of the consultation process. Zebralog pointed out the risk that the media will focus solely on abuses or missed detections of abuse, losing sight of the actual content of the dialogue. Systematic attacks and media campaigns that uncover abuse, failure by the administration to detect abuse, or falsely labelled abuse make it easy to publicly discredit the consultation process in the media.

➔ **Objection 4:** *Legal, administrative and usability problems caused by real name policy and request for personal data result in negative media attention and negative public perception.*

Finally, the probably biggest objection from Zebralog as well as the administrative department of Gütersloh and Demokratie Wagen was that negative media combined with *usability problems* on the side of citizens can be expected to make citizens less likely to participate. On the one hand, usability problems occur when citizens are not prepared to reveal their real name and personal data to the administration and political decision-makers, and even less so to other registered users. The reasons for a rejection to participate with clear identification are manifold, ranging from fear of economic or political disadvantages to avoidance of discrimination or stalking (see e.g. York, 2011). On the other hand, even if citizens are not explicitly unwilling to share their personal identity, they may be unable to cope with the more difficult registration process; the fact that registration is only possible when completing the fields with one's correct real name and personal data is a high barrier to participation as many initial entries are likely to be incorrect. Hence, Maria Unger (SPD), major of Gütersloh, stressed, similar to the open participation argument, that the request for real names and personal data is likely to be a barrier for participation and thereby lead to a drastic reduction of participants. As citizens' participation is the core of every e-participation project, a decline in participation may lead to the failure of the whole consultation process.

➔ **Objection 5:** *Real name policy and request for personal data cause usability problems which act as a barrier to participation and thus lead to a decline in participation.*

4. Advantages and Limitations: Observations and Directions for Further Research

After having outlined in the last section the core arguments advanced in favour and against real names and personal data before the start of the online consultation, this section will provide some preliminary observations made after the consultation process was completed. Besides material such as technical data, speeches and press articles, interviews were conducted with Anke Knopp from Demokratie Wagen and Norbert Monscheidt from the administrative department.[7] In this context, it should also be noted that the prevalent opinion of citizens regarding the decision to prohibit anonymous participation is not known. Although the online platform contained a feedback site and a poll on the question of anonymity, the lack of critique against real names, and the poll result in favour of real names are hardly meaningful since there was no possibility for non-registered citizens to raise their critique against real name policy without providing their real name. It should also be kept in mind that the following assessment is neither representative nor can it provide detailed evidence for all rationales or objections. The intention is rather to prepare the ground for subsequent research by highlighting questions and areas that deserve more attention in further studies. The evidence given by the case of Gütersloh is nothing more than an indication.

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[7] In the interview, Norbert Monscheidt preferred only to talk about factual information and not about subjective evaluations. Moreover, several attempts were made to interview Markus Kottmann (CDU) as political representative and proponent of real name policy. Unfortunately, it was not possible to arrange an interview with him.

4.1.   Observations Regarding Rationale 1

Real name policy and request for personal data ensure that only citizens from Gütersloh
participate, thereby enhancing representativeness and in turn legitimacy.

Despite real name policy, the difficulty to detect abuse made it impossible to proof that all participants were citizens of Gütersloh. However, it is unlikely that many citizens from other municipalities will have made the effort to participate under false name. The contents of the online discussions also do not allude to the presence of non-Gütersloh citizens. It can thus be assumed that no – or at least very few non-Gütersloh citizens participated. However, the question that remains is whether the exclusive participation of Gütersloh citizens truly enhances representativeness and legitimacy. Here, three remarks are in order. First of all, regarding the very low rate of participation in the second consultation process, it is questionable whether the results can really be seen as more representative than the first consultation process (without real name policy). Secondly, it should be kept in mind that representativeness has actually never been the aim of such participatory projects. Lastly, real name policy does not guarantee exclusive participation by Gütersloh citizens anyways, since those who do not live there but are subject to taxes (such as businesspeople) can still participate.

4.2.   Observations Regarding Rationale 2

Real name policy and request for personal data ensure a high quality of dialogue by
preventing offensive comments from anonymous citizens.

Although no quantitative data regarding the number of offensive comments in the second online consultation in comparison to the first process could been obtained, the low number of comments allowed for simple qualitative screening which revealed a rather civilized dialogue with almost no necessity for the moderation to intervene. Unfortunately, however, it would have gone beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the quality of comments in the first, anonymous consultation process, and to compare how much of a difference real names make. In this context, Knopp (2011a) remarks that many politicians saw a large number of comments in the first consultation process as offensive and defaming, notably regarding the discussion about fire brigades. Knopp, by contrast, saw most of these comments rather as the proof of emotional dedication to the topic. Similar to scholars like Mouffe (2005), she also stressed the importance of emotions and voicing straightforward critique for the political culture.

4.3.   Observations Regarding Rationale 3

Real name policy and request for personal data ensure transparent communication,
thereby strengthening democracy.

This claim is difficult to assess empirically, on the one hand because it is at its core a question of one's conception of democracy, and on the other hand because the strengthening of democracy can hardly been measured. Interestingly, as uncovered in the proposed resolution of the administrative department, there is a fundamental but flawed presumption underlying such kind of argumentation: In fact, although often only seen as a characteristic of online communication, anonymity is widely spread in the political sphere, and conventional democratic participation processes such as elections, citizen proposals or demonstrations are largely held anonymously (Stadt Gütersloh, 2011b). Moreover, Demokratie Wagen (2011c) pointed out a discrepancy between this kind of argumentation in favour of transparency, and the anonymous political decision-making procedures exercised over proposals such as the one concerning the introduction of a municipal fire brigade. According to Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the decision was made anonymously in order to protect party members and ensure their free speech. Knopp (2011a) even goes as far as suggesting that rather than a strengthened democracy, the real reason for the proclaimed importance of clearly identifiable persons stems from the experience of the first consultation process in which topics were brought up that were not part of the politicians' agenda, fostering the wish of politicians to keep things firmly in hand and to know who they are talking to. It

is questionable whether this contributes to a strengthened democracy. On the contrary, Ruesch, Basedow and Korte (2012) propose anonymity as a core criterion of open, inclusive and low-threshold participation and by extention of an open democracy.

4.4. Observations Regarding Objection 1:
Real name policy and request for personal data distract from issue-related dialogue and thus degrade the quality of discourse due to biased, person-focused perception of messages.

In order to assess this objection, which can - as all rationales and objections - also be read as a testable hypothesis, it would be necessary to empirically analyze and compare the quality of the comments on the platform in both Gütersloh's first and second consultation processes, for example with the help of a method like content analysis. Such an analysis would have gone beyond the scope of this paper, yet it would be a valuable undertaking for subsequent research. Of course, an empirical analysis of the second consultation process in Gütersloh would be limited, not least because of the low number of comments that can be analyzed. In order to make generalizable claims, such a study would have to look beyond the case of Gütersloh.

4.5. Observations Regarding Objection 2:
Real name policy and request for personal data violate citizens' right to privacy.

Interestingly, while this objection seemed to be invalidated before the start of the consultation process due to the approval of the registration plans by the Data Protection Officer of North Rheine-Westphalia, a letter of the Data Protection Officer in the aftermath of the online consultation process suggests a very different evaluation (Knopp, 2011a). In this letter, the Data Protection Officer raises serious concerns over the compulsory request for publicly viewable real names. In fact, he remarks that he had not been informed about this course of action prior to the online consultation process and thus had presumed that real names and personal data would remain anonymous to unregistered as well as registered users on the platform. In his letter to Anke Knopp, he states that registration with compulsory real names and personal data as a measure to verify citizens of Gütersloh is as such not problematic in terms of Data Protection Law, but that users must have the right to protect their privacy by appearing publicly under a pseudonym (LDI NRW, 2011; Knopp, 2011c). Further research on the citizens' opinion of anonymity would surely be valuable in this regard.

4.6. Observations Regarding Objection 3
Real name policy and request for personal data cause time- and cost-intensive administrative problems.

In the interview with Norbert Monscheidt (2011) from the administrative department of Gütersloh, he explained that the expected higher expenditure of time and efforts due to citizens' problems with the registration procedure or due to the sanctioning of abuse did not occur. There were only a few requests by users who needed help with the registration process. However, this observation does not invalidate the argument that real name policy may have consequences on the amount of time. For one, it is natural that the very low rate of participation kept administrative efforts at a reasonable amount. Moreover, no cases of abuse were detected; hence no sanctioning had to take place. It remains open whether the fear of abuse was unnecessary, whether abuse took place without being detected, or whether the consultation process was just too unattractive for people to use criminal methods in order to participate. While this question is surely not easy to answer by subsequent research, it may be valuable to keep the objection in mind when conducting other participatory consultations.

4.7.   Observations Regarding Objection 4
Legal, administrative and usability problems caused by real name policy and request for personal data result in negative media attention and negative public perception.

In the case of the second participatory budget of Gütersloh, there was only little media resonance and no campaigns around the consultation process. At first sight, this could lead one to suggest that the fear of negative media attention due to real name policy was without cause. However, as Knopp (2011a) remarks, there was not just no *negative* media or public attention, but there was hardly *any* media or public attention. According to her, the whole consultation process was just too unattractive for both citizens and the media. Of course, these are just speculations, thus further research such as a review of relevant media and interviews with citizens may help shed more light on the question.

4.8.   Observations Regarding Objection 5
Real name policy and request for personal data cause usability problems which act as a barrier to participation and thus lead to a decline in participation.

This objection had been the most serious one in the run-up to the second participatory budget, as a high rate of participation is one of the major success criteria of e-participation projects like online moderated participatory budget consultations (Kubicek, Lippa & Koop, 2011). 1.7 percent of the population of Gütersloh participated in the first participatory budget. Compared to other online moderated consultation processes such as in Lichtenberg or Cologne, this is a rather high rate, suggesting that the participatory budget 2011 sparked a lot of interest among citizens. By contrast, only 0.4 percent participated in the second consultation process for the participatory budget 2012. As a consequence, it was labeled as a 'failure' by Demokratie Wagen*, the media, the administrative department and political representatives alike (Demokratie Wagen, 2011d). The question that remains is whether the real name policy can be made responsible for the decline in participation.

5.   Concluding Observations on the Relationship Between Real Name Policy and the Decline in Participation

As mentioned above, many factors may have contributed to the drastic decline in participation. Lack of transparency and missing responsiveness may have been amongst them, pointing notably to the opaque selection procedure of proposals for the second phase (Knopp, 2011a). Knopp (2011d) also criticized that the information event was held at the very end of the consultation rather than at the start. Other factors that may have contributed to a low rate of participation, such as a lack of resources or too little publicity, seem not to be that relevant in Gütersloh, as they did not differ much from the first, successful participatory budget (Monscheidt, 2011). From the political and administrative side, lack of interest by the citizens in politics and finances of Gütersloh was seen as one of the major reasons for the failure of the second participatory budget (Christine Lang in Demokratie Wagen, 2011d). Noting that on site participation events also did not attract more participants, they suggested that the reason cannot be found in the online format or real name policy (Guetersloh.tv, 2011). However, this speculation is questionable, acknowledging that about 6,000 citizens of Gütersloh engaged in a big campaign regarding a swimming pool, yet even though there was a proposal on the online platform regarding this topic, not many people commented or voted on the issue. Citizens just seemed to prefer other channels of raising their voice, even though they had made intensive use of the possibility to participate online in 2011.

In fact, the media, Demokratie Wagen and Zebralog have all suggested that real name policy and the request for personal data had a negative influence on the rate of participation (Kosbab, 2011). Interestingly, an evaluation of the server log files revealed some valuable information. It showed that 38 percent of all citizens who accessed the registration site left the site without

registering.[8] This compares to a bounce rate of 20 percent in the participatory budget in Frankfurt (www.ffm.de), where real names and personal data were requested but not verified, and a bounce rate of only 13 percent in both Aachen (www.aachen-rechnet-mit-ihnen.de) and Essen (www.essen-kriegt-die-kurve.de), where neither real names nor personal data were required for registration. The comparison is a strong indicator for the suggestion that the more data are compulsory for the registration process, the higher the barrier is for participation. This hypothesis is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1: Hypothesis on the relationship between real name policy, the request for personal data and participation rates

Of course, as outlined above, this hypothesis needs further evidence. For the moment, it is nothing more than a suggestion for further research. Unfortunately, rather than trying to find out why citizens did not participate, political representatives and the administrative department of Gütersloh have been inferring lack of interest and raised serious doubts as to whether at all to organize a participatory budget 2013. For example, Christine Lang, head of the Gütersloh financial department, proposed to abstain from the Internet-based format and to use other, more small-scale methods of citizen participation in the future (Guetersloh.tv, 2011). Knopp (2011a) referred to these plans as "mega damage for civic participation".

Interestingly and very unexpectedly, on the 12th of March 2012, the Budget Committee decided in favor of a third participatory budget (Neue Westfälische, March 13, 2012a). The strong criticism against real name policy, notably by the Data Protection Officer, brought about another surprising decision: For Gütersloh's participatory budget 2013, the municipal council decided to allow anonymous participation again. The participatory budgeting process for the budget 2013 took place in October and November of 2012. Unfortunately, the hopes of increased participation did not materialize. With only 0.28 percent of the population, even less citizens participated compared to the previous year. Lang thus concluded that the interest in the participatory budget is just not high enough among citizens (Neue Westfälische, November 28, 2012a). This can certainly be counted as evidence against the above outlined hypothesis. Nevertheless, conclusions should not be drawn to fast. Other reasons for the lack of participation might, for example, be disappointment from the previous year, or a lack of publicity. Again, as already outlined above, in order to make valid claims about the reasons for non-participation, interviews with citizens would help shed more light on this question.

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[8] It should be noted that this bounce rate does not count in citizens with a script.

6. Conclusion

This paper has set out to link the current debate about real name policy and request for personal data on social networks and online forums to the area of e-participation. Using the example of Gütersloh's second participatory budget, major rationales and objections regarding real name policy and request for personal data were identified for the special case of online moderated consultation processes. The preliminary observations that were made based on the Gütersloh case provide evidence for the suggestion that the negative consequences of real name policy in e-participation outweigh the positive ones. The positive consequences, notably restriction to citizens from Gütersloh, more civilized and more transparent communication, lose their relevance in the light of negative consequences such as a low rate of participation, restricted diversity of opinions, person-focused dialog and violation of privacy rights. Moreover, the use of moderation and pseudonyms can account for some of the problems associated with anonymity. Although no empirical correlation could be established between real name policy and low rate of participation, the example of Gütersloh indicates that 'bad practices' of e-participatory projects can lead to disenchantment with politics when citizens have the feeling that they are not taken seriously. Of course, these observations can certainly not be treated as representative, both because they are limited to the case of Gütersloh and because they lack comprehensive empirical analyses such as interviews with citizens. Besides some practical observations, one of the most important insights of this paper is probably that many of the arguments in favour or against real name policy in the area of e-participation are based on beliefs. While some of these beliefs are hard to measure (e.g. the strengthening of democracy), others such as the quality of comments, citizens' attitude towards real names, or usability problems, can and should be treated as hypotheses and tested empirically. The case of Gütersloh also illustrated very well that participatory budgeting is still young; it is a learning process for all involved parties, and conceptual decisions may not always be the right ones. On a more theoretical level, the paper has highlighted the necessity to distinguish between different online spaces when talking about real name policy and request for personal data. These spaces cannot be generalized to 'the Internet'. Lastly, the relevance of this paper is underlined by the fact that discussions about real name policy in e-participatory projects are not limited to Gütersloh. Interestingly, the *district* (Kreis) Gütersloh decided to allow anonymous participation in its e-participatory budget project (Kreis Gütersloh, 2011). Now is the time to back up such decisions with empirically tested arguments. It remains to be seen if these efforts will revoke tendencies towards real name policy in e-participation.

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