

Chapter 63

The Impact of Information and Communication Technology on the Rise of Urban Social Movements in Poland

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ABSTRACT

The chapter examines the relationship between the use of Information and Communications Technology (ITC) and the emergence of social movements focused on urban agenda in Poland. The aim is to investigate how and to what extent a growing body of smaller activist groups use opportunities provided by the ITC to achieve their political objectives. The research results indicate that Web-based media have helped to raise the profile of local initiatives and increased awareness of systemic urban issues between different groups of grass-root actors. The findings of the chapter are based on the analysis of the Congress of Urban Movements (Kongres Ruchów Miejskich: KRM), a broad coalition of smaller non-governmental organizations and bottom-up activist groups, which use Internet-based tools to network. The results indicate that the Web-based tools increase the members' ability to connect and interact, consequently improving the ability to coordinate joint initiatives, expand real-life social networks, and in the result stimulate the rise of urban social movements.

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INTRODUCTION

The question in what form and to what extent citizens should have the right to influence the process of urban governance and especially urban planning became one of the topics of academic and political debate in Poland. Such a discussion must be viewed in the wider context of the development and maturation of democracy in a country which underwent a transition from a centralized mode of planning and decision-making. This debate has reached the point in which the declarations about the participatory, collaborative, and deliberative nature of planning procedures and the city management made by public institutions are not enough. More and more different groups of citizens expect to be the real partners in decision-making processes that affect their everyday life. The objective of this chapter is to analyse how social expectations and ambitions clash with institutional practices of social participation in urban planning and decision-making procedures and what type of social activity emerges as a result. In our view, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) contributes to the mobilization of social movements, yet the praxis and mechanisms of embedding this technology into the struggle for participation needs to be explored deeper. In the chapter, we hypothesized that ICT has helped to facilitate the organization of the movements and their efficacy. Although social mobilization is growing, the public sphere in Poland is not ready and willing to absorb social participation in governance processes. The different pace of processes of change in social and public institutional spheres leads to an increase in tensions. To test this hypothesis, we examined the role that ICT played in the expansion of activities in the bottom-up movement alliances. We conducted interviews and a case study to explore the role of new tools.

Research and theorization of the residents' role in the planning procedures and processes of decision-making have a long and rich tradition. The literature on the subject agrees that participation has to be treated as a continuous process with different forms and stages. In the 1960s, a participation ladder consisting of different steps was described by Arnstein (Cornwall, 2011). However, only recently appropriate conditions and climate for change have arisen to intensify the public participation debate. The crisis of representative democracy, the growing social contestation of the hegemony of a neoliberal mode of development, and the ICT revolution are standing behind the digital renaissance (de Vreese, 2007). In new democracies, these processes are more pronounced, allowing the opportunity to explore the interaction between new media and the development of a grass-root activism.

The democratic system in Poland, as in other Central-Eastern European countries, is strongly based on mechanisms of representative democracy and on a strong mandate given to public administration. The shortcomings of such a system are particularly visible and commonly experienced in conjunction with the political capitalism of the post-transformation stage, in which the strong players (economic entities, social groups, or individuals) exploit the lack of regulations and the weakness of the state for rent-seeking. At the same time the dynamics of ICT development, resulting in the population's rising access to the Internet, create a fertile soil for the dissent activism within the democratic society. The rich Polish history of dissent activism inevitably influences the urban arena, and quite often opposition movements even more. However, the rise of contemporary civil society movements is of a different nature than the heroic revolts of the struggle for freedom, such as the Solidarity movement. While social movements in the totalitarian state took the form of illegal resistance, the democratic civil society organisations and activities are involved in the state administration management (Raco & Imrie, 2000). Today Polish citizens are mainly involved in the grass-roots activism on a local scale. The very high ethical standards, unity around values, and anti-politics of the national movements have been gradually replaced by the plurality, fragmentation, and particularity of the local civil society movements (Koczanowicz, 2003).

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