NCCR Democracy: taking stock after four years of research

Since the autumn of 2005, social scientists have been working together in NCCR Democracy to study the two challenges to democracy they consider crucial: globalization and the growing influence of the media on politics, referred to as ‘mediatization’. It is now time to draw the first conclusions and to ask the two NCCR directors, Hanspeter Kriesi and Frank Esser, to give an assessment of the program so far.

NCCR Democracy has completed its first phase. From your point of view, what are the most important findings?

Hanspeter Kriesi: Our goal in the NCCR is to provide as balanced an account as possible of the consequences of globalization and mediatization for democracy – some of them highly problematic, others encouraging. Since the NCCR is a broad programme, it cannot be reduced to some unique findings. Therefore, I would like to provide some examples, which I personally find very important, rather than pointing out the most important findings.

A project by Lars-Erik Cederman, Simon Hug and Andreas Wenger has been analyzing the impact of democratization in regions troubled by internal conflicts. One of its most important findings is that democratization may cause civil war if the masses are mobilized before political institutions are prepared to accommodate this level of participation. This thought-provoking, disquieting result is innovative because almost all systematic studies so far have focused on interstate warfare or have failed to measure democratization as opposed to more general types of regime changes. For the first time, the relationship between patterns of democratization and ethnic conflict is shown. The findings are not only relevant for science but also for policy makers who should be aware of possible dangers before ambitiously attempting to export democracy to conflict regions.

Another project by Yannis Papadopoulos studied the impact of the European integration process on national politics in Switzerland and comparable small EU member countries. Most interesting for a Swiss audience is the finding that the impact of European policies in the non-member state of Switzerland turns out to be no different from the impact in the three member states included in the study. European integration modifies decision-making processes in Switzerland and weakens the influence of organized interests in policy making because it strengthens the executive to the detriment of parliaments and domestic interest groups.

With regard to mediatization, Frank Esser’s project has shown that in Western European countries the presentation of political news is increasingly influenced by commercial media logic. While there are signs of mediatization, however, they depend on the national context. On the other hand, the project also observed that news performance is becoming more complex and sophisticated in the countries under comparison. In other words, the increasingly powerful role of the media is not all bad news for democracy.

Finally, three projects in Research Module 4 found that Swiss direct democratic campaigns are above all enlightening for the voters. Normally, the overwhelming majority of the voters ends up making choices that are consistent with their preferences. The exception concerns proposals submitted to the voters...
that are very complex and difficult to understand – such as the corporate tax reform submitted to Swiss voters in February 2008. In this case, many made choices inconsistent with their preferences. For a lay person, the proposal was just too complicated to understand. In addition, there was an extreme imbalance regarding the resources available to the relevant actors in the campaign: business associations were clearly at an advantage here as opposed to unions. Money favors the use of paid media, and as a result business associations were better able to pass their message on. The whole debate turned out to be very one-sided and the result would have been a different one if both sides had had the same resources available.

Frank Esser: What has emerged from the first phase is that the two challenges, mediatization and globalization, do not mean a ‘downhill all the way’ scenario for democracy; and where we do find crisis phenomena, questions of blame or causality can be complex. For example, the project team led by Frank Marcinkowski examined the extent to which the news media can obstruct amicable agreements in political negotiations. Yet it turns out that political negotiations are rarely ever disrupted because of a clash between transparency-seeking, conflict-hungry media logic on the one hand and confidentiality-seeking, compromise-dependent political logic on the other. They are much more often violated because of politicians leaking indiscretions intentionally to the media in a strategic effort to improve their bargaining position. This illustrates that the forces at play are often interactive in nature and require careful analyses.

Why do you consider the two challenges examined by the NCCR, mediatization and globalization, as the most important ones?

Kriesi: There are, of course, other challenges to democracy such as demographic change, technological change, commercialization, the increasing social and economic inequality and cultural heterogeneity with their potentially disruptive consequences for democratic society. All of these challenges are important for the future of democracy, too. By focusing on mediatization and globalization, we do not want to argue that these two challenges are more important than others. But we maintain that both of them go to the heart of democracy as we know it: Globalization puts into question democracy’s core assumption: the congruence between political decision makers and the demos that chose them to make the decisions on its behalf. The increasing role of the media for politics, in turn, profoundly transforms the character of political communication, which is at the core of democratic politics.

Esser: I agree, many of our projects draw connections to other important challenges. For example, the projects that study mediatization are interested in the personalization of political communication, which is closely related to another challenge: individualization. These projects are also interested in defining the specific operating logic of the news media, which increasingly corresponds to a commercial logic, following the commercialization of media organizations. In sum, yes, we took the deliberate decision to limit ourselves to two core challenges, but have taken an integrated approach wherever necessary to discuss our findings in the context of other meta-societal trends.

How are democracies adapting to these new challenges?

Kriesi: One way democracies react to the challenge of globalization is by an increasing politicization in the form of defensive, nationalist reactions. Frank Esser
in the spring of 2005, or in the electoral success of new challengers from the new populist right (such as the French FN, the Flemish Vlaams Blok, the Dutch Li Jst Pim Fortuun or Freedom party), or transformed mainstream parties of the conservative/liberal right (such as the Swiss SVP, the Austrian FPÖ or the Dutch VVD).

The adaptation of democracies to the mediatization of politics has so far been cast in mainly negative terms as well: observers have identified trends towards a ‘deparliamentarization’, ‘presidentialization’ of democracies, the rise of a ‘party-less’ and of a ‘plebiscitary’ democracy, and in news reporting the replacement of substance by personalization and spin. Our research projects, however, come to quite moderate conclusions: we can observe a trend toward media-centred coverage of politics, but there is also a trend towards a growing diversity of sources of news reporting and an increasing focus on dialogue. The increasing role of the media also strengthens their guardian functions. Moreover, the digital revolution provides individual citizens not only with a wealth of information, but also with the opportunity to become a more active partner in the political communication process.

Esser: This is a point worth reiterating: although media logic has clearly begun to impinge on the operational rules of politics in many democracies, it has nowhere led to the dissolution of a political system or the collapse of a state. Neither has it led globalization to the destruction of democracy. What our project teams observe is the emergence of new models of democracy, like media democracy, audience democracy, network democracy or multi-level democracy.

Some of our projects study whether there is indeed a fundamental power shift at the expense of political institutions and in favor of the mass media. Where we find indications of such transformations, they are not actually forced upon political organizations by the media but more the result of a voluntary, self-determined act. Often times the mere belief that the media could be powerful seems sufficient for parties or governments to initiate internal structural changes, which then reshape their political communication outlook: parties professionalize their publicity efforts, hire consultants, centralize their flow of information and rely on pseudo-events or strategic leaks – all in an attempt to compensate for a loss of autonomy, whether that loss is real or not. Similarly complex processes of reciprocity are found in the relationship between globalization and politics.

Are there any policy recommendations you would make?

Esser: Regarding mediatization, the potential for policy recommendations is limited because in most democracies media policy restricts the influence of the state on media structure. In Western societies the principle of press freedom is highly valued; therefore the regulatory opportunities of the state are generally limited. However, in many countries we study there is growing concern that to leave the media fully to market forces might threaten their basic democratic functions. Media policy must also secure the orientation of the media towards the needs of society. This can be achieved by setting some ground rules, and by encouraging media organizations to abide by self-chosen principles. Journalistic principles that foster democratic processes include values like objectivity, civility, empathy, social inclusion, democratic efficacy and public interest orientation. But realizing these principles requires media businesses to accept and adopt certain accountability standards in their political affairs coverage – even if these quality standards cost them money. It is exactly at this point where it needs a lively public debate, a growing awareness among political actors, media entrepreneurs, journalists and the news-consuming public that these qualities are vital for democracy.
Kriesi: A good example of a project from which one can derive positive lessons for democracy is our study of Swiss direct democratic campaigns. Based on our analyses, we can conclude that the Swiss context provides conditions that are generally very favourable for enlightening campaigns: The political strategists and the media have developed routinized procedures to approach these campaigns (they know how to do them). The political strategists provide ample substantive input into the public debates that focuses on the content of the issue at hand, and does not distract from substance by discussing mainly secondary aspects of the contest itself. Both camps that oppose each other in these campaigns are capable of crafting powerful messages, and both camps get a fair hearing in the media. With some exceptions, the media are not primarily market-driven, but invest in political news reporting and provide intense, diverse coverage of the campaign of considerable quality. On average, the voters get a steady stream of arguments and voting cues allowing them, in principle, to make an enlightened choice – that is a choice that is in line with their preferences. There are some exceptions to these favourable conditions, an example of which I have already mentioned, and which indicate where some of the dangers lie for direct democratic procedures.

The Swiss case can be a promising model for direct democratic votes in other countries or in the European Union. The results of our analyses provide a guide for how to proceed. Moreover, the special case I mentioned before, of proposals that are too complex and difficult to understand, serves as a warning of what may go wrong in the Swiss case as well.

How can the media contribute to a better functioning of democracy?

Esser: The media can contribute to the liberal paradigm of democracy by performing their watchdog role vis-à-vis power holders, facilitating rational debate, allowing for pluralism in their news coverage and offering a forum for diverse groups. Secondly, the media can contribute to deliberation – this is achieved by strengthening people’s participation and articulation through online polls, feedback options and other internet activities. In addition, the media can stimulate political interest through an engaging and inclusive reporting style that relates to people’s lives and helps them realize their political identities and interests. If covering contested issues, the reporting style should be argumentative and consensus-oriented. Finally, the media can contribute to the participatory element of democracy. This is realized by empowering marginalized groups and lowering the access barriers for lay people, for example by offering them new communication channels that invite civil and interactive democratic talk. This may be somewhat idealistic and more likely to happen in internet-based fringe media than traditional mainstream media. The biggest challenges to these positive contributions are commercial and competitive pressures that let media organizations pursue profit interests more resolutely than public interests.

Did the collaboration between political science and communication bring new insights?

Esser: Yes, I think so. Whereas many political scientists tend to forget the mass media, communication scholars tend to suffer from a distorted media-centric worldview. This collaboration within the NCCR reminds communication scholars of the political fundamentals their research should be founded upon, and it reminds political scientists that the mass media are more than mere technical channels. Instead, media organizations like the Swiss SRG, the Sun, Weltwoche or the New York Times should be viewed as collective actors that pursue certain goals and act in the interest of realizing these goals. Grouped together they follow a trans-organizational mode of operation, called ‘media logic’, which refers to their specific rules of selecting, interpreting and constructing political news messages. But before one could debate such issues it took a long time to find a common language and mutual acceptance for each other’s research questions. Dissolving the boundaries between the two disciplines may have been the true challenge of the first phase. I personally learned a lot from my colleagues in political science, mostly about my own deficiencies, which has made it a sometimes painful but ultimately extremely rewarding experience.
Kriesi: Indeed, it did take more time than expected to get used to one another – the two disciplines have surprisingly different disciplinary cultures. After four years of trying to learn from one another, I agree with Frank that both disciplines benefit from each other: the communication scientists from learning more about the importance of the political context – the institutional setting, the configuration of power and the political strategies of the political actors; while the political scientists benefit from paying attention to the communication side of politics. Politics is communication, and this insight can be highly productive for political scientists, while the notion that political communication takes place in a political context that varies from one country to another and from one issue subsystem to another can be equally productive for communication scientists. The new projects we started in October 2009 are much more integrative in disciplinary perspective than four years ago, and researchers from both disciplines have now teamed up in common projects.

The Swiss National Science Foundation renewed funding for another four year-period in October 2009. NCCR Democracy decided to continue to study the same two challenges: Why, and what is new in Phase II?

Kriesi: The task is huge and our study of these two challenges to democracy is not completed yet. We have analyzed just some limited aspects of them and there is much potential for continuing productivity. Some research projects will narrow their focus on specific themes they detected in the first phase. The projects studying democratization, for example, will focus on the contested and uncertain status of the demos. The question of what should constitute the popular unit on which democracy is based is at the heart of problems of democratization. Another research module analyzing the effects of globalization and mediatization on established democracies shifts its focus from political institutions and procedures to political actors. Furthermore, our research projects will expand their analysis to further countries.

Esser: In addition we would like to devote more attention to instances where the influences of mediatization and globalization act together in their influence on democracy. In some areas, for example, the media may need to update their watchdog role by adjusting to the decline of the nation state, particularly in areas where governments are no longer capable of holding transnational actors accountable, or where the activities of regulatory agencies are far from transparent. There are other areas, too, where the media may assume new roles due to transcending national boundaries. The internet already plays an important role in facilitating global activism and international elite dialogue. Of special interest is the EU, where many observers expect the news media to help create a European public sphere, or other kind of community, that can help reduce the EU democracy deficit. In fact there are many fascinating areas where mediatization and globalization intersect, and they will keep us busy for at least another four years.

Editorial

Close to four and a half years into the research program, NCCR Democracy can look back at a significant level of activity. More than 20 projects have been completed and the research has resulted in numerous scientific publications. A number of events have taken place to transfer the research findings to the scientific community, policymakers and the general public. The first cycle of the doctoral program has been completed and its participants are now embarking on their careers. Last but not least, the Center for Democracy in Aarau has been founded, which means that democracy research in Switzerland will remain institutionalized beyond the NCCR Democracy’s lifetime.

Based on these achievements and the positive evaluations of the past four years, international experts have encouraged the NCCR to continue its research along the same lines. The Swiss National Science Foundation and the Swiss government in October 2009 thus renewed funding for the NCCR for another four years.

This issue of our newsletter presents some activities and achievements of the past phase, and an overview of the research planned for the coming four years.

Yvonne Rosteck, Editor
NCCR Democracy Phase II 2009–2013
Research projects at a glance

Constituting democracy in multinational polities

Conceptions of Europe – alternative demos conceptions in the EU
Leaders: Daniele Caramani, University of St. Gallen / Kurt Imhof, University of Zurich

In the last two decades, the process of European integration has accelerated. However, a European identity is growing only slowly among the citizens of the EU. This project assesses the conflicts between different conceptions of European identity („images of Europe“), conflicts over types of integration, and the consequences for the formation of democratic institutional structures.

Designing „demoicracy“ in Europe
Leaders: Francis Cheneval, University of Zurich / Sandra Lavenex, University of Lucerne / Frank Schimmelfennig, ETH Zurich

This project starts from the assumption that a democratic EU must be a „demoicracy“, in which the idea of democracy is reconciled with the persistence of multiple demois. It seeks to explain and evaluate the design and workings of those EU institutions that can be seen as „demoicratic“ prototypes, and therefore to contribute to the study of institutional designs appropriate for a democratic EU.

Elected and non-elected political actors in denationalized policy-making

Civil society - government interactions in global governance
Leaders: Thomas Bernauer / Vally Koubi, ETH Zurich

This project focuses on how civil society groups (NGOs and business groups) and government representatives interact in the context of global environmental policy making and analyzes the role of the mass media as an instrument of public mobilization on both sides. Thus, it examines how globalization has an effect on civil society groups’ mobilization at the global level, and explores the states’ monopoly of power to regulate at both national and international levels.

Internationalization, mediatization, and the accountability of regulatory agencies
Leaders: Fabrizio Gilardi, University of Zurich / Yannis Papadopoulos, University of Lausanne

Regulation has become an important public policy, whose responsibility has in many cases been delegated to independent agencies. The project assesses the performance and public accountability of these agencies in order to contribute to their improvement and to increase public awareness about the regulatory activity of regulatory agencies.

Cleavages, governance and the media in European metropolitan areas
Leaders: Prof. Daniel Kübler, University of Zurich / Prof. Frank Marcinkowski, University of Münster

Globalization and the consequent international competition between cities have led to a regionalization process and the emergence of so-called metropolitan areas. Political decision making increasingly has shifted to the local and regional level. The project examines how this process has impacted on the democratic quality of policy making in metropolitan areas in Switzerland, Germany, France and the United Kingdom.
Mediatization - Implications for politics, news media and the public

Mediatization of political reality: Implications of media-centered reporting styles for democracy
Leader: Frank Esser, University of Zurich

The logic of news making and policy making do not always coincide and sometimes openly clash. This project investigates whether and to what extent the media content of political affairs today is more governed by a media logic (presenting and defining politics in such a way to gain people’s attention) or a political logic (serving the needs of political actors, institutions and democracy as a whole).

Mediatization of political interest groups: Changes of organizational structure and communication repertoire
Leaders: Patrick Donges, University of Greifswald / Otfried Jarren, University of Zurich

This project examines whether and how interest groups have changed their communication repertoire and their organizational structure during the last ten years as a reaction to the growing importance of the media in politics. It aims to find out whether interest groups are governed by a political logic or a media logic that may be at odds with the logic of the democratic process.

The mediatization of political decision making
Leaders: Sarah Nicolet / Pascal Sciarini / Anke Tresch, University of Geneva

This project studies the nature, extent and consequences of mediatization on political decision making. It examines the extent of the agenda-setting power of the media, whether media coverage is governed by a “media logic” or a “political logic” and to what extent political actors and institutions adapt to media logic.

Mediatization of political attitudes: Becoming a democratic citizen in a multimedia environment
Leaders: Heinz Bonfadelli / Frank Esser, University of Zurich / Claes de Vreese, University of Amsterdam

This project addresses the fundamental question of how young people develop into democratic citizens in a society influenced by entertainment-oriented media and mediatized politics. How do they develop democratic attitudes and values and civic engagement?

Changing processes and strategies of political participation and representation: comparing public debates

Strategies of political actors
Leader: Hanspeter Kriesi, University of Zurich

This project studies strategies of political actors in a public debate. It aims to find out how the different political actors in five countries (Germany, Italy, France, UK and Switzerland) try to influence the debate on the specific topic and what their impact is on public opinion.

Strategies and processes of issue selection and construction: comparing public debates
Leader: Gabriele Siegert, University of Zurich

This project aims to find out how media organizations in five countries (Germany, Italy, France, UK and Switzerland) deal with the problem of market orientation versus journalistic values in covering public debates. Under what conditions do media organizations produce which kind of political news coverage?

The strategies and processes of attitude formation and public participation in comparative perspective
Leader: Werner Wirth, University of Zurich

This project studies the effects of the public debate on citizens’ attitudes across five European countries (Germany, Italy, France, UK and Switzerland). The aim is to draw a full picture of the cognitive and affective influences of the media on attitudes.
The antecedents of public opinion expression – a cross-national study of debate participation
Leader: Jörg Matthes, University of Zurich

The project investigates the factors and mechanisms that lead to the expression of public opinion. In particular, it examines the conditions under which citizens suppress their opinions in public situations, the impact of media content and media use on opinion expression and how public opinion expression differs in selected European countries.

Political representation

Democracy barometer
Leaders: Marc Bühlmann, University of Zurich / Wolfgang Merkel, WZB Berlin

On the basis of the data for 75 established democracies collected in Phase I, the project focuses on the explanation of different qualities of democracy, and the analysis of the political as well as the societal impact of differences in the quality of democracy.

E-voting: Smart-voting 2.0
Leader: Andreas Ladner, IDHEAP Lausanne

This project examines important questions regarding the effects of electronic voting-advice applications on electoral behavior and tests several theories on electoral behavior for Switzerland.

Contextual factors and the spatial model of electoral competition
Leader: Romain Lachat, University of Zurich

This project investigates how the voting decision process is affected by the political and institutional context. By examining how politics and institutions affect citizens’ decision-making, this project aims to improve our understanding of elections and to find out under which institutional and political conditions a system of democratic representation works most efficiently.

Deliberative experiments and direct democratic voting
Leaders: André Bächtiger / Thomas Gautschi / Marco Steenbergen, University of Bern

In order to identify institutional, psychological and individual conditions that drive voting decisions, the project conducts online experiments on selected topics of upcoming direct democratic votes in Switzerland. The aim is to find out what people would think and decide if they thought, knew and deliberated more about the issue at hand.

Calendar of events

Challenging Democracy
International conference organized by the Academia Engelberg in cooperation with NCCR Democracy
13–15 October 2010
Academia Engelberg
http://www.academia-engelberg.ch/conference_2010.php

Wahl-Probleme in der Demokratie
(Electoral problems in democracy)
7–8 April 2011
Center for Democracy Aarau
http://www.demokratietage-zda.ch/
New Assistant Professor for Political Communication assumes office

NCCR Democracy welcomes a new assistant professor in political communication. Professor Jörg Matthes assumed office in August 2009, bringing with him a rich and varied background in interdisciplinary research. Mainly interested in public opinion formation and participation in public debates, he will contribute to the ongoing NCCR research as well as to enhancing the international visibility of NCCR.

By Alpana Varma

His appointment is pursuant to the grant of a non-tenure track assistant professorship for six years made by the University of Zurich to the NCCR. The profile was defined broadly as Assistant Professor in Political Communication/Political Behavior, so that candidates from political science as well as communication science were eligible to apply. It underlined the cooperation between the two disciplines. Twenty-three candidates from six countries had applied, and Jörg Matthes, a post-doctoral researcher in the NCCR Democracy and at the Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research (IPMZH) of the University of Zurich, was selected.

His research focuses on the processes of public opinion formation, trust in news media, news framing, advertising effects and empirical methods. On all these matters, he has a strong record of international journal publications, and he has received several awards from international scientific associations. Interestingly, his earlier background is in psychology; and he did his MA at the University of Jena, Germany, in 2001 with a specialization in social psychology and communication. In 2007, he completed his PhD thesis at the IPMZH on “Framing effects: How the media influence citizens’ political attitudes.” He explains: “Media framing is based on the idea that journalists select some aspects of issues and make them salient, while other aspects are left out. For example, in the case of biotechnology, the issue can be framed in terms of progress in science or in terms of moral concerns and risks.” In his thesis, he was able to show the effects of news-media content on attitudes and that these can be strong and significant.

Jörg Matthes will contribute to the ongoing NCCR research on the effects of political media content on individuals’ opinions and attitudes. “By adopting a micro-perspective that focuses on psychological processes of opinion formation, I strive to understand how public opinion unfolds, changes, and ultimately, how democracy works in times of globalization and mediatization,” he explains. In his NCCR project he investigates the factors and mechanisms that lead to the expression of opinions in public debates, especially under conditions of an unfavorable or hostile opinion climate. He considers these questions as important because in non-voting contexts – such as debates – public opinion expression can be regarded as the key mechanism of political participation. “Trying to understand how news-media content, individual-level factors (such as the level of motivation, or belief in the efficacy of debates), or political context contribute to participation in public debates, can be useful for guiding political actors in mobilizing the public, and ultimately, for ensuring the quality of deliberative democracy”.

In order to contribute to the international visibility of the NCCR, he will also try to build new and strengthen already existing networks of political communication scholars worldwide. This includes inviting scholars from other countries to joint workshops and colloquia, organizing NCCR special issues in international journals and having a presence at international conferences on political communication. He also wishes to further strengthen the relationship of communication and political science scholars within the NCCR. Furthermore, he is looking forward to contributing to education and training as a communication sciences representative in the board of the NCCR doctoral program.

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Career development: 
An assessment of the NCCR doctoral program

The NCCR Democracy doctoral program, an interdisciplinary program for PhD students in the NCCR's core disciplines of political science and communication science, completed its first cycle in 2009. The aim of the program is to enable its participants to obtain qualifications and skills of such a quality that they can embark on a successful social science career. Tina Freyburg, representative of the doctoral students from 2007 until 2010, draws a final conclusion and gives her assessment of whether the program provided an adequate preparation for an academic career.

By Tina Freyburg

Writing a PhD sometimes resembles a rollercoaster ride, with its ups and downs. It can be a much more enjoyable experience if you are not alone in the carriage and are able to scream in chorus. The NCCR Democracy provided its doctoral students with a semi-structured program, in which, during the past four years, they have not only acquired valuable soft skills and scientific knowledge, but also shared precious support and advice. Institutionally, the program has been established to create a supportive, intellectually stimulating and interdisciplinary academic environment within which doctoral students can more readily carry out their research. In this sense, it clearly mirrors the structure and standards of the NCCR itself: it unites students from both political science and media & communication sciences, it connects project collaborators, fosters exchange and joint enterprises across individual projects, and it commits itself to the advancement of young researchers – not only to NCCR members but also to a number of external students that were admitted to the program.

The idea of semi-structured PhD training is to professionalize education of postgraduate students in order to prepare and position them for the (academic) job market. In spring last year, the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) dedicated a symposium to “Academic Profile-Building”. Several contributing authors (see box on page 12) emphasized the PhD pluses junior scholars must acquire to improve their chances on the academic job market in the social sciences. Let us take the criteria identified as important and reflect to what extent the NCCR Democracy’s doctoral program enabled its participants to fulfill them:

Completed PhD thesis

The first criterion for building a promising academic career is obviously the successful completion of a PhD. However, it seems that not only the fact of having completed matters, but also the time needed to do so. Apparently, hiring committees often see completion time as a signal for the added-value the candidate can be expected to bring to the overall productivity of the department. For the NCCR Democracy doctoral program’s participants this criterion is nothing to worry about: to date, more than half have completed; while the others anticipate submitting their thesis by mid-2010.

Yet, a completed PhD thesis has become a necessary but no longer sufficient qualification for postdoctoral employment. Five criteria are most commonly identified as additional requirements: publication record, broad knowledge of the discipline, teaching experience, good training in methods and mobility.

Publication record

‘Publish or perish!’ is a slogan that every student learns to memorize very quickly. Today’s PhD students are expected to publish articles that appear in highly-ranked journals even before their PhD is completed. This requirement bears at least two inherent problems. First, the ‘quality vs. quantity’ dilemma: ‘A few excellent articles in high-quality journals are more valuable on a CV than several articles in a marginal journal, but the longer the publication record the better for your department and thus (internal) promotion’. Second, most students write a monograph, which usually means that they seek to publish parts of their thesis as they are finished. The possibility of writing a paper-based PhD clearly facilitates that task, but postpones ‘the book’ to a later stage. The publication record of the NCCR students bear traces of these challenges. Still, a survey conducted only recently revealed that about half of the program’s participants have already published an article in a peer-reviewed journal that is either single-authored or co-authored with another doctoral student. In addition, the majority of the students sub-
mittred papers that are written together with their supervisor(s), and many have published or are about to publish their work in an edited volume.

**Broad knowledge**

When they start working on their PhDs, postgraduates are confronted with the difficulty of finding and establishing their own niche: that is, of identifying a topic that not only interests them hopefully for the next few years to come, but that is also ‘fresh’ and innovative. They are thus asked to become specialized in a narrowly defined research theme. At the same time, candidates are required to possess a broad knowledge of general debates in and beyond their discipline. Probably, this is one of the biggest advantages of being a collaborator in a large research program such as the NCCR Democracy. It allows students to focus on their subject speciality and be embedded in research on either broader or different themes at the same time. The majority of students also published in the context of the overall research project, which makes their thematic flexibility more visible. The doctoral program offered many occasions for exchange across project and discipline lines. For instance, workshops and research colloquia provided the opportunity to discuss the NCCR’s research agenda with experts in the field, and familiarized the participants with the broad range of research topics their peers worked on. Another possibility to show wider knowledge of the discipline is to teach basic seminars.

**Teaching experience**

Obviously, if you decide to stay in academia, it is very likely that you will be expected to teach. Most NCCR students have done so. Some conceptualized and taught their own (under-)graduate seminars every semester, some assisted their professors and offered tutorials, others even lectured. For all, teaching was a possibility to acquire credits needed to successfully complete the doctoral program.

**Training in methods**

One observation widely made is that European social sciences are becoming more and more Americanized, which also means that training in quantitative and qualitative methods is required. Attendance in summer institutes formalizes this training and makes methodological knowledge and diversity more accessible. The NCCR doctoral program provides generous funding to attend summer training programs. Participation in at least one summer school was even mandatory for the successful completion of the program. Almost all students participated in at least one course of the prestigious summer institutes in Michigan, Essex and Ljubljana.

**Mobility and international visibility**

One of the most important lessons one can learn from the very early stages of graduate life is that mobility helps. It helps to get valuable advice, to exchange with interesting scholars and peers, and to get to know alternative ways of how to meet certain challenges. At the same time, it seems as if many open positions in academia are assigned “on the quiet”, meaning that getting a job is more likely if one completed undergraduate studies, a graduate degree and part of the post-doc assistance in the department offering the post. Given the limited number of available positions this also means that candidates need to be prepared to look for a job elsewhere. Independently of the personal situation and willingness to go abroad, the NCCR Democracy doctoral program well prepared its participants to meet this requirement. The research colloquia and workshops with invited international experts enabled doctoral students to exchange and meet with scholars from abroad. In addition, and probably far more important, the program provided the opportunity to benefit from mobility and to invest in international visibility. More than one-third of the doctoral students spent several months at research institutions abroad, in the USA, Canada and throughout Europe. All of them took part in international summer training programs, some even in several of them, and their participation record in international conferences is impressive.

In a nutshell, I am very happy to share my good feelings with you. All of us who participated in the doctoral program already fulfill or will very soon fulfill the outlined requirements. We would like to take the opportunity to thank the NCCR Democracy for having provided such a supportive and intellectually
The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

A challenging environment that enabled us to conduct high-quality research. Special thanks go to the members of the programs’ board – Ioannis Papadopoulos, Simon Hug, Frank Marcinkowski and Doreen Spörer-Wagner – who always sought to learn how the doctoral program could be further improved. Finally, we would like to wish good luck to the new generation of NCCR PhD students. Enjoy the ride!

Contact

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NCCR Democracy Alumni: Testing waters beyond academia

The NCCR doctoral program aims to prepare students for their careers by imparting to them a structured and professionalized education. On completion of their PhD thesis they are faced with a very important decision: whether they would like to remain within academia or tread beyond and enter other, more practice-oriented fields. Now that the first cohort of PhD students has left the NCCR Democracy, we will keep track of the career decisions they take by introducing a regular feature on our alumni in this newsletter.

By Alpana Varma

Although the majority of the students who have finished their PhD in the first phase of NCCR Democracy in 2009 have stayed on as academics, a few have chosen to pursue a career in other fields. Here we present two former PhD students who chose the latter path: Political scientist Philippe Koch, who is now engaged in the public sector; and communication scientist Martina Vogel, who is well ensconced in the corporate world.

Philippe Koch has been working as a scientific employee for the urban development division in the cantonal administration of Basel city for a year now. This division had just been newly founded. He wrote his PhD thesis on the development and change of area-wide governance structures in Swiss metropolitan areas in the field of public transport. He feels that his research and its findings are very much relevant to his present job, since how to establish and/or alter area-wide governance structures is a relevant question for the highly fragmented metropolitan area of Basel. This is especially true for urban transportation.

He explains that the political steering capacity in the field of public transport is fragmented in Basel as there are five cantons, three countries and at least three providers involved in the process of planning, financing and providing the urban public transport service. Thus it is a complicated, lengthy and often highly conflict-ridden process; and it stands in sharp contrast to the demands and requirements of a metropolitan area. The improvement of the local train system, for instance, progresses very slowly. Therefore, one major challenge is the reorganization of the existing governance scheme, which was exactly the topic of his research.

As this work is very similar to academic work, it was not difficult for Philippe to make the transition to his current job. His research helps him to understand the current situation and the possible paths for development, even if the results of his research do not directly apply to the context of Basel. He is currently working on a project that analyzes the importance of urban traffic infrastructure for the development of the metropolitan area as a whole. The aim is to outline scenarios of urban development as a function of the extension of the railroad infrastructure. In this, he is working in close collaboration with other divisions of the cantonal administration. He says that at NCCR all students were obliged to make presentations based on their work and to engage in different network activities. This experience helps him in the present job as he is working in different settings and with a

Symposium in European Political Science 2009, 8.


Stefurtuc, Irina: Introduction. Building an academic profile – considerations for graduate students embarking on an academic career in political science in Europe, 138–42.

Mair, Peter: The way we work, 143–50.

Thorlakson, Iori: Collected wisdom: advice to new entrants to the profession, 162–7.
The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

wide range of people. Nevertheless, Philippe recently decided to accept a job offer from the Institute of Political Science in Zurich. “I like research” he says “and this is the major reason why I want to work again in academia.”

Martina Vogel is consultant and responsible for political communication in the agency Patrick Rohr Kommunikation in Zurich. Her doctoral research at the NCCR was about how government communication in several European countries has changed during the last 15 years. She also analyzed the reasons for these changes and their impact on democracy. She feels that her research findings help her greatly in her current job: on the one hand, they are of relevance when advising government organizations or representatives; while on the other hand, her research is an important door opener as the customers of her company appreciate that she has a theoretical background as well as practical experience concerning political communication.

For her “a typical day” does not exist as her job is “indeed chameleonic”, and that is something she really enjoys. In the last few weeks, she was managing an election campaign for a politician. She was doing the whole gamut, starting with the concept, designing an image, a slogan and a website, writing texts, bodies of arguments, speeches and newspaper advertisements. She was also coordinating public appearances on TV, organizing shootings and so on. “I jumped with joy when I heard ‘my’ candidate was elected”, she says. Currently, she is working on a marketing concept for a Swiss canton.

Martina says that for her, taking the big step outside of academia was easy, but she is fully aware that she had a “lucky shot”: it was by chance that she met her boss on a network event. However, she prepared her “big step out” long before, not knowing what the outcome might be. She says that she learnt many things while at the University and the NCCR that are helping her in her work today. On the one hand, there is the aspect of craftsmanship, such as methodological know-how, cross-linked and logical thinking, investigation and research, presenting results and budget management. On the other hand, there are the “social skills”: that is, dealing with different people, convincing reviewers, bargaining, arguing and so on. But for her the most important experience was the understanding that although the academic world is very interesting, she would like to be “on the other side”, being practical and implementing her theoretical background.

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Peer mentoring: Four years of Stepping Stone – Taking stock and looking ahead

In 2006, 15 young female researchers founded the first NCCR Democracy peer-mentoring group, ‘Stepping Stone’, with the aim of helping each other meet the challenges of the demanding and highly competitive academic world. Four years later, the group members have finished their dissertations or are about to do so and head out into the job market. NCCR Democracy asked Anne Wetzel, coordinator of Stepping Stone, to draw her conclusions on the utility of the peer-mentoring program.

By Anne Wetzel

During the last four years, Stepping Stone members have gained valuable knowledge and skills through the activities of the peer group. They have organized a variety of events such as workshops on giving effective presentations, conflict management, voice training and chairing meetings, public roundtable discussions on publishing a dissertation and changing career paths from academia to the public/private sector and back. Furthermore, they held informal meetings with established scholars in order to discuss the prospects of an academic career and engaged in active networking with other peer groups, such as Politikplus and PoliNet of ETH and the University of Zurich and the peer-group coordinators of the NCCR Iconic Criticism.

Besides improving their general skills, the members of Stepping Stone were able to develop concrete strategies for their individual careers in the framework of group activities. A workshop on project management in the first year enabled the young researchers to better plan their PhD work, set feasible milestones and assess their work progress. Furthermore, the group supervisors provided insightful comments on individual CVs. Towards the end of writing their dissertations, questions such as how to successfully apply for funds for a follow-up research project or for jobs gained importance among the group members. The first topic was addressed in a workshop that presented existing national and international funding opportunities and outlined the basic principles of grant writing. The second topic was the focus of a workshop on post-doctoral career planning. The initial part of this workshop was dedicated to active reflection on the group members’ career ob-
jectives, while the subsequent part dealt with questions of how to prepare an effective application in different professional contexts.

Stepping Stone, however, has not only focused on the advancement of female PhD students and post-docs through the above mentioned activities, but has also been an attentive observer of broader developments regarding the situation of female researchers within NCCR Democracy. In particular it tried to raise awareness on topics such as under-representation of women in NCCR bodies and events, maternity, and compatibility of work and family. In 2007, it published a statement on ‘Advancement of Women in the NCCR Democracy’. Moreover, the group initiated a monthly financial maternity/paternity bonus to support young parents within NCCR. This idea was later adopted by the NCCR doctoral school as a general guideline for the program. Last but not least, the group’s members have benefited from strong mutual support and encouragement in an exciting but sometimes also critical phase in their lives. Peer-group members have provided each other with advice on their dissertations, on applications for jobs and grants, on problems that occurred in the daily work or sometimes ‘just’ lent an ear.

All group members agree that they have had valuable experiences with the peer group and that it has advanced female researchers. It helped them to develop their academic, administrative and social skills, actively plan their career and get feedback and support from other peers and researchers. With the end of Phase I, Stepping Stone faced the question of whether and how to continue as a group. There quickly emerged a consensus to go on as an informal alumni group. Thus, although many members have taken up new positions, partly in other places and other professions, they will stay in contact.

Given its very positive experience, Stepping Stone is particularly happy to see that a new NCCR Democracy peer group has been founded in Phase II and offers its support to its members. We also welcome that some of the above mentioned workshops have been integrated into the NCCR Democracy doctoral program, and are open to all PhD students.

The group would like to thank all supporters, workshop instructors and researchers who shared their experience with us as well as our supervisors Profs Gabriele Siegert (University of Zurich) and Simon Hug (University of Geneva) for their help and advice. We would also like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for the financial support of the group.

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Stepping Stone’s website will continue to be accessible under http://www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch/peer_mentoring
Financial crisis and democracy

In March, the Center for Democracy Aarau (ZDA) organized the second Aarauer Demokratietage (Days of Democracy) in Aarau – a yearly event that brings together science, politics, media and citizens to discuss topical questions of democracy. This year, renowned speakers discussed the global financial and economic crisis and its implications for democracy.

The Aarauer Demokratietage started with an opening speech by Georg Kohler, Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Zurich, on “crisis, credit capitalism and the possibilities of democracy”. Credit capitalism (“Pumpkapitalismus”) is a term coined by the late Ralf Dahrendorf expressing a social and economic mentality in which “Enjoy now, pay later!” has become the maxim. This phenomenon of taking on debts, and making money from money that one does not own and most likely does not exist at all, has taken hold of nearly all citizens of advanced capitalist societies in recent decades. Dahrendorf called for a new relationship to time in economy and society, in which mid- and long-term thinking and action gain in standing as opposed to rash solutions. However, Kohler doubts that the crisis will have the effect of a cleansing thunderstorm leading to a shift from credit capitalism to more responsibility and sustainable thinking. He fears that managers of banks and insurance companies may also rely in the future on state rescue measures: “They have to learn to bear the consequences of their failure,” he said calling for measures to prevent another crisis which may hit us even harder.

The lecture was followed by a roundtable discussion led by Katja Gentinetta from the Swiss think tank Avenir Suisse, and composed of illustrious guests from the world of finance, media and science. Eugen Haltiner (Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority, Finma), Joachim Strähle (CEO Bank Sarasin), Beat Kappeler (Neue Zürcher Zeitung), Thomas Jordan (Vice-chairman of the Swiss National Bank) and Hanspeter Kriesi (NCCR Democracy) all agreed that Switzerland has managed the financial crisis comparatively well. In October 2008, the federal government decided on a rescue package for the country’s financial system, injecting cash into its largest bank, UBS, which had racked up huge losses. The decision was taken rather unexpectedly and without debate in parliament or even a referendum, and the question was discussed whether the democratic system may have been damaged by this. Eugen Haltiner pointed out that democratic processes are unsuitable for crisis management as it is of major importance to act quickly. Thomas Jordan acknowledged that emergency law was applied and that the Swiss National Bank almost reached the limits of its mandate in providing the liquidity assistance to UBS. Both agreed that it is now the task of politics to learn from the crisis and to develop new framework conditions that will allow for an improved capacity to act in a crisis.

Hanspeter Kriesi agreed that the Swiss government and the Swiss National Bank have made the best of a disastrous situation. However, he stressed that the scandal was that they had no other option than to apply emergency law. It is now important to come to terms with the consequences of the crisis in a democratic process. Beat Kappeler pointed out that this is precisely what is lacking in Switzerland: serious
commitment from politicians to discuss and draw conclusions about the crisis. Instead, they engage in polemics and concentrate on secondary themes such as banker bonuses. He finds the quality of the parliamentary debate rather disappointing. It is the task of politicians to explain complex issues, such as financial market regulation, to their electorate even if this is painful; but up till now they have not succeeded in doing so. Nevertheless, Hanspeter Kriesi replied that debating is an important part of the democratic process even if it is not always rational and matter-of-fact. It is only through debating that democratic rules can be worked out that will make a new crisis less likely, and enable political and economic experts to re-establish the credibility they have lost during the crisis.

The Aarauer Demokratietage continued the following day with a scientific conference on the financial crisis and its consequences for law, regulation and education in economics.

More information and abstracts on the contributions to the scientific conference can be found on the website of the Aarauer Demokratietage at www.demokratietage-zda.ch.

**New publications**


**Living Reviews in Democracy**

http://democracy.livingreviews.org

Living Reviews in Democracy is an innovative e-journal, containing cutting-edge information on the latest research on the topic of democracy. Articles are fully refereed and kept up-to-date by their authors.

Bormann, Nils-Christian. Patterns of democracy and its critics, 2010

NCCR researchers seek debate with the public

The first research phase of NCCR Democracy was completed in September 2009, and to mark this occasion a series of events took place to transfer the research findings to a broader audience.

Political communication in Switzerland

In September 2009, a group of projects analyzing the effects of mediatization on democracy organized a scientific conference: “Switzerland – an exceptional case in political communication?” The notion of Swiss exceptionalism forms the basis of a long-standing debate on Switzerland. It stresses the egalitarian, participatory and consensual character of Swiss democracy, which distinguishes it sharply from its European counterparts and influences political media coverage to a significant extent. The conference examined the quality of political communication in Switzerland and compared it to neighbouring countries in order to find out if this viewpoint is still warranted.

A public panel discussion on the same topic was part of the event. The panel included Swiss National and European councillor Andreas Gross, Neue Zürcher Zeitung journalist Martin Senti and NCCR members Gabriele Siegert and Kurt Imhof. The discussion showed the divergent viewpoints in media, political and academic circles about the quality of political communication in Switzerland and in neighbouring countries.

Promoting democratic governance

Two projects organized two scientific conferences in order to disseminate their research results on democratization and conflict in troubled regions, and on how the EU promotes democracy in its neighbourhood. They also jointly organized an expert workshop: “Theory meets practice: promoting democratic governance in Eastern Europe, in the Caucasus, and in the African Great Lakes”. Several representatives of the Council of Europe, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, non-governmental organizations such as the Swiss Helvetas and the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), as well as academics, took part. The purpose of this event was to disseminate NCCR research findings within the policy, civil society and media community, to provide a reality check for the research, and to promote an exchange between academics and practitioners.

Current changes in Swiss politics

Yannis Papadopoulos, who led a research project on the impact of internationalization on Swiss policy processes in Phase I, held a conference in Bern with the aim of showing how research on Swiss politics can contribute to a better understanding of the current changes in Swiss politics. Topics included the structure of decision making in Switzerland, changes in the process of federal decision making, strategies of political actors in campaigns, votes and coalitions in the National Council, and direct democracy. Discussants were politicians, representa-
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Political representation

The two projects “Democracy barometer” and “Smart-voting” organized a scientific conference on political representation. This was against the background of the new challenges faced nowadays by representative democracies – the decrease of confidence in political representatives being the most important. The aim of the conference was to discuss possible new forms of representation and instruments that enhance representation and trust. The contributions to the conference by various renowned international scholars will be published in a book.

News in brief

First publication award by the NCCR Democracy doctoral program

The first NCCR Democracy program ended in 2009 with a final workshop in which PhD students discussed the results of their projects with international senior scholars from communication and political sciences. The workshop took place in the Swiss Alps in Grindelwald and one of the highlights was the announcement of the first winner of the Doctoral Program Publication Award. This was won by Martino Maggetti for his article on the role of independent regulatory agencies in policy making, published in the Journal of European Public Policy in 2009.

The publication award has been established by the board of the NCCR doctoral program to honour outstanding junior scholar research and to make it more visible. Doctoral students whose research had been accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal were eligible to apply for the award, which has a value of 1000 Swiss Francs. Four papers had been submitted and were evaluated by a jury of three international experts in the field: Klaus von Beyme (University of Heidelberg), Doris Graber (Columbia University) and Johan P. Olsen (University of Oslo).

EU Profiler wins “World e-democracy forum award” 2009

EU Profiler (http://www.euprofiler.eu/) has won the most renowned international award in the field of e-democracy: the “World e-democracy forum award” 2009. The prize acknowledges the EU Profiler’s contribution to changing the world of politics with the internet and new technologies. It was conferred at the World e-Democracy Forum in Paris on 22-23 October 2009.

EU Profiler is an online tool that was used during the last European elections by some 2.5 million citizens. It allowed users to compare their opinions with those of some 300 European political parties before voting in the June 2009 elections to the European Parliament. In the jury’s statement it was emphasized that the EU Profiler is an innovative site of “advice in the vote”, allowing citizens to find their political identity.

EU Profiler is a cooperative project of the European University Institute (EUI), Amsterdam-based Kieskompas and NCCR project Smart-voting.

1st NCCR Democracy Publication Award

NCCR Democracy Knowledge Transfer Award 2009

Scientists need to transfer their knowledge into society in order to contribute to public discourse and enable concerned societal groups to benefit from the research findings. In order to foster and reward transfer efforts by its researchers, NCCR Democracy annually confers a knowledge-transfer award. In 2009, two doctoral students, Judith Vorrath and Anne Wetzel, received this prize.

The NCCR Knowledge Transfer Award recognises special achievements in transferring knowledge gathered in NCCR research to groups outside academia. For the year 2009, this award was conferred on Judith Vorrath and Anne Wetzel, with each of them receiving a cash prize of CHF 2,000.

Judith Vorrath is a doctoral student in the NCCR project on “democratizing divided societies in bad neighbourhoods”. She was awarded the prize for the lectures she held in 2008 and 2009 at the KV Zurich Business School – the biggest institution for vocational training in the field of commerce in Zurich. Her lessons were based on her research on ethnicity, conflict and transformation in the African Great Lakes region, one of the regions covered by the NCCR project. They were taught as part of the regular ethnology course for business trainees in a class of about 15 pupils.

The aim was to make the pupils familiar with the research done in the NCCR project and to link it to the contents of their course. In her lectures, Judith shared insights from the field research she conducted in Burundi between 2007 and 2009. The pupils had previously dealt with ethnicity and genocide in Rwanda, and so comparison with the case of Burundi and discussion of what ethnicity means and how it is related to conflict in these two countries were at the core of the lessons. Furthermore, the post-conflict period and political transformation in Burundi was also dealt with and discussed.

Anne Wetzel received the award for an article in Ukraine Analysen – a publication that offers regularly an assessment of the current political, economic, social and cultural developments in Ukraine. The journal makes available knowledge gained from scientific research to representatives of politics, the economy, the media and the concerned public.

Anne’s article was based on her research on Ukraine as part of the NCCR project analyzing how the EU promotes democracy in the neighboring countries of Eastern Europe. In her article, Anne has shown how the EU and the Ukraine have been cooperating for a decade in the field of government aid policies. The aim is the adjustment of Ukrainian legislation in line with that of the EU and, as a result, the enhancement of transparency and accountability. Despite various projects under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, however, the results have been rather sobering. Till today, not a single piece of legislation relating to state aid policies has been adopted.

NCCR Democracy congratulates the winners and looks forward to more transfer activities in 2010.

The 2009 winners of the NCCR Knowledge Transfer Award: Anne Wetzel (left) and Judith Vorrath.