Measuring democracy has a long tradition in political science and there is a huge range of propositions of how to distinguish democracy from other regimes or even how to measure the degree of democracy. Examples are the Vanhanen-Index, the Polity- and the Freedom House-Index – to name only the most widely used. However, these instruments fail to consider that established democracies are as much in need of critical assessment as unconsolidated ones. Their most severe shortcoming is that they are too unsubtle to measure the fine but obviously existing differences in the quality of democracy between countries. Even though we would intuitively distinguish the quality of Italy under Silvio Berlusconi or the USA under George W. Bush from Sweden under Goran Persson, all three countries rank highest in the most widely used indices of democracy.

The *Democracy Barometer* tries to overcome their shortcomings. The main aim of the project is to measure the differences in the quality of democracy between established OECD countries and across time. Therefore, the underlying concept of democracy is broader and consists of a stepwise theoretical deduction, moving from three fundamental principles of democracy – freedom, equality and control – to specific components (see Table 1).

The starting point is the premise that a democratic system tries to establish a good balance between freedom and equality, and that this requires control. Second, these three principles are represented by five defining elements (so-called “partial regimes”) that secure democracy and make up the root con-

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Measuring the quality of democracy in democratic countries (from left): Marc Bühmann, Lisa Müller and Wolfgang Merkel.
The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation

The aim is to measure to what degree the functions are fulfilled, and thereby to assess and compare the quality of democracy across the 30 OECD countries. In a first step, this will allow the description of different existing types of democracy. A simultaneous maximization of all functions is unlikely and the quality of democracy is highest where the different functions are combined in a manner that allows the highest effectiveness in all of them. This idea is best illustrated by a spider web, with the axes representing the nine functions (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the development of the quality of democracy between 1990 and 2005 will be analyzed for each country. Preliminary results show that the quality of democracy indeed differs in the 30 OECD countries. One example is the democratic function of vertical accountability, which describes the obligation of elected political leaders to justify their political decisions, as well as the ongoing process of monitoring and questioning these decisions by citizens or voters. This function is measured by the competitiveness and the openness of elections. The degree of vertical accountability varies widely across 19 of the 30 OECD countries analyzed so far: according to these preliminary assessments, for example, in 2003 it was highest in Belgium, Japan and Denmark, and lowest in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. This is mainly because the former three countries have a large selection of different parties and at the same time low accessibility barriers for new interest groups that wish to enter the political arena. In contrast, the three Anglo-Saxon countries are two-party systems and the barriers for new competitors are much higher.

Another example is the function of representation: each political regime reflects to a certain extent the prevailing balance of power among social groups. Representation is measured by the constraints of active and passive suffrage, the degree of waste of votes and equal access to power. In this analysis, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands ranked highest in 2003 because different minorities are well-integrated into the political process through active and passive suffrage. In contrast, Turkey, Japan and Switzerland performed lowest. In these countries, the access to power for structural minorities is more constrained.

In the future, the research team plans to examine whether the quality of democracy can be explained by the institutional design of a political regime. The team will construct a website presenting the diagrams and rankings, and from where all the indicators for the assessment of the quality of democracy can be downloaded. Providing public access to the data serves at least three different purposes: first, to be as transparent as possible; second, to encourage the broader public to reflect on democracy and its elements; and finally, to enable other researchers to benefit from the data collection, to build their own assessments, and to enrich the data with more suitable indicators. Thus, the research team’s aim is to contribute to the scientific discussion on the measurement of democracy.
New center for democracy founded in Aarau

Publication

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In a joint effort, the City of Aarau, the Canton of Aargau, the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland, the University of Zurich and NCCR Democracy are founding a Center for Democracy in Aarau (Zentrum für Demokratie, ZDA). The ZDA will be committed to democracy research and knowledge transfer into society. By conducting basic research and offering courses in continuing education and public events, the center is expected to have an impact not only on the academic community but also on the general public. It will contribute to the political discourse on democracy and therefore link science with practice.

The ZDA is the first democracy research center in Switzerland, and a unique model for a partnership between a municipality, a canton, a university of applied sciences, and a university: Zurich University is contributing three NCCR Democracy projects to the center, while the City of Aarau will sponsor a professorship in democracy studies at the University. The Centre was originally planned as a joint venture between the City of Aarau and the University of Zurich. In June 2007, the citizens of Aarau approved of the ZDA in a popular vote. In the course of founding the center, the Canton of Aargau and the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland also became involved in the initiative.

The aim of the center is to institutionalize democracy research in Switzerland in the long run, given the fact that NCCR Democracy is a temporary limited research program. The University of Zurich supports this aim and has therefore also decided to integrate the Center for Direct Democracy (c2d), which recently moved from the University of Geneva to Zurich, within the ZDA.

Based at Villa Blumenhalde in Aarau, the ZDA will take up its work in January 2008 and will be composed of the following three departments:

Democracy research: consisting of three NCCR Democracy projects – Democracy Barometer, Civic Education and Smart-voting – and a new professorship in democracy studies at the University of Zurich, which will be filled in the coming year;

Direct democracy: Research Center for Direct Democracy (c2d), directed by a professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Zurich;

Civic education: Civic Education and Didactics of History, directed by a professor at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW).

One of their aims is to encourage the public to reflect on the complexity of democracy and the role the mass media play in this. In order to transfer research knowledge into teaching, two projects develop online learning tools for civic education at the secondary school and undergraduate levels. Two projects examine the opportunities and risks of internet-based voting-assistance tools, which are increasingly used in election campaigns. Finally, one project aims at building long-term networks between NCCR researchers and journalists in order to ensure the successful dissemination of research by the media.

In the future, NCCR Democracy knowledge transfer will be further strengthened through the first center for democracy in Switzerland, founded in Aarau this fall. The center is a joint endeavour of the City of Aarau, the University of Zurich/NCCR Democracy and other partners. It will link science and practice by combining research, education and discourse on democracy.

Sincerely, Yvonne Rosteck, editor
The media and their contribution to democracy

Given the importance of the mass media for the effective operation of modern democracies, it is essential to ask how they actually contribute to the functioning of democracy – and where mass media fail to meet expectations. The NCCR project “Media for Democracy Monitor” (MDM) concentrates on this question and aims to assess the democratic performance of mass media in contemporary democracies.

Modern democracy and the mass media are intrinsically related. The mass media are a vital, indispensable link between those who govern and those who are governed. If the mass media do not inform the citizens thoroughly and impart partially about government policies and their consequences, as well as about the alternatives to government policy proposed by opposition parties and civil society, the people’s democratic choice is severely limited. The mass media in turn require democracy as it is the only form of government that respects freedom of speech, expression and information, and the independence of media from the state.

However, multiple changes affect the role of the mass media in modern democracies and challenge their functioning. In every democracy the mass media face the danger of being censored in a subtle, but effective, way by those who have political and/or economic power. At the same time democratic societies face the danger of the media simply neglecting their information-giving task. It is therefore important to observe the contribution of the mass media to the functioning of democracy over time in order to identify threats and opportunities.

This is the aim of the research project „Media for Democracy Monitor“. The researchers assume that the better the media serve the needs of democracy, the better democracy works. Therefore, they have developed an instrument to monitor the performance of the mass media in relation to democracy. By comparing different countries in Europe, patterns of media institutionalization, media organization, media coverage and consumption with regard to democracy will become visible.

First, the research project will develop a set of internationally comparable indicators to describe the relation between the mass media and democracy and to assess the democratic performance of mass media. In a second step, it will collect the necessary information to establish a first edition of the MDM: i.e. a ranking of the analyzed countries and an international report on the status of European media democracies. As such an integrated research approach has never been used before, the researchers hope that the MDM ranking facilitates a public debate about the ranking position of the analyzed countries. The first edition will be published in August 2008.

In order to get additional input, the research team organized an international conference on media democracy monitoring at the Swiss Centre for Studies on the Global Information Society. In June 2007, experts in monitoring initiatives were invited to Zurich to report on the strengths and weaknesses of their work.

The participants discussed, in four panels, the relations and structures of democracy and the mass media. They looked into: (1) legal and administrative aspects of the mass media; (2) their structural and economic conditions; (3) their organizational framework; and (4) mass-media content and consumption patterns.
Monitoring the state and performance of the media has a long tradition. Since the Second World War, international organizations have been watching constraints of freedom of expression which is one of the essential norms of democracy and is laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the Council of Europe, as well as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Organizations monitoring the status of freedom of expression keep an eye on violations by media organizations (e.g. infringements of personal rights) and by the state (e.g. censorship).

Regarding this matter, Karin DeutschKarlekar (Freedom House, New York) described the cornerstones of an environment that enables the media to perform without political, economic and legal pressures: a strong civil society, an open government, assured human rights, and a free flow of information and ideas. Roland Bless (OSCE Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, Vienna) focused on the daily intelligence on breaches of media freedom, and the findings of assessment visits that concentrate on government and regulatory structures and compliance with the OSCE principles of rule of law, economic liberty and social justice.

In Panel 2, the speakers debated opportunities and threats for democracy within the economic structure of media production. Commercialization and concentration on the one hand, and increased managerial freedom and economic independence following deregulation on the other hand, influence media performance. In this regard Kaarle Nor denstreng (University of Tampere, Finland) emphasized that the assessment of media performance can identify processes of change affecting the role of the mass media in modern democracies. Kristina Weissenbach (University of Duisburg) presented the KonradAdenauer-Foundation Democracy Report 2005. This questionnaire of freedom of the press asks for the legal framework of freedom of the media, and for the economic situation in the examined countries – e.g. the state’s financial influence over the media and the media’s general economic situation.

The third panel concentrated on ownership and organizational structures within media companies and their implications for the media’s democratic performance. The free and unrestricted execution of journalistic tasks requires protection from interference. However, speakers underlined that there are threats coming from many directions, not only from the state authority. Renate Schroeder (International Federation of Journalists) stressed that media freedom is going through critical times, in particular as the “war on terror” heavily affects journalistic reporting. Apart from physical intimidations, commercial pressure increases because of cuts in editorial budgets. Torbjörn von Krogh (Kalmar University, Sweden) emphasized that journalists should understand their role in democracies as messengers for citizens, not for high government officials.

The fourth panel looked into the content and output of the mass media and discussed its relevancy for democracy. The first speaker was Roland Schatz of Media Tenor, the largest independent news-monitoring operation in Europe, which hand codes and analyzes opinion-leading media outlets. Finally, Patrik Ettinger and Linards Udris (Zurich University) spoke about their work in the NCCR research project that links the structural data of media systems to the content side of news.

In his keynote speech, Lee Becker (University of Georgia) summarized the state of international research in the field of media-democracy monitoring. He pointed out that monitoring organizations around the world invest a significant amount of money in media-assistance programs. These programs are based on the assumption that the promotion of free and independent media staffed with well-trained journalists contributes to the development of democracy. However, there is no solid evidence to support this assumption. Relatively little work has been done to evaluate media-assistance programs. It is therefore essential to look at the impact of assistance programs on individual journalists, on the media organizations, and on the media system itself.

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Politikzyklus: exploring the democratic process online

In a globalized and modernized society, political issues and contexts become increasingly complex and complicated. Young students in particular have difficulties in understanding political processes. In order to prevent them from turning away from politics, they need learning tools that help to spark their political interest and engagement. In the civic education project of the NCCR Democracy, researchers from the University of Applied Sciences FHNW are therefore developing the online learning tool Politikzyklus, enabling students to better understand and analyze the political process.

The learning tool is designed for civic education at Secondary Level I in Switzerland, and aims to improve the quality of education in this area. The main goal is to reinforce the interest of young people in politics. The novelty of Politikzyklus is that it illustrates and explains the policy cycle, a well-known concept in political science, in order to achieve this goal and to show how political problems are solved.

A socio-political issue can be understood on the basis of the terms policy, politics, and polity. First, the different interests and concepts underlying an issue such as naturalization or mediation are analyzed. It then becomes evident that socio-political issues always create tensions that need to be resolved by a political process. The external constraints and the bounded scopes of actors are shown. Different opinions are formed for which propositions are formulated. The proposition that is most likely to be accepted by the majority is selected and subsequently realized. Finally, the political structures refer to the institutions and organisations within which the political process takes place. The learning tool shows that democracy is developed by a challenging and tedious social negotiation process. The primary focus is not on structures anymore, as it usually is in traditional civic education classes, but on processes – the question is not what a democracy is but how a democracy works.

The Politikzyklus learning tool combines traditional teaching forms with electronic means of communication. An advantage of online learning tools is that they are available to students during school lessons as well as in their spare time. Learning thus becomes possible anywhere and at any time. Furthermore, new learning habits of students are taken into account since they increasingly use the Internet for solving tasks or studying new subject areas.

Embedded in the NCCR Democracy, the civic education project can benefit from the research being carried out in other NCCR projects by integrating their research questions and findings into the learning tool and thus transferring them to the students. This task is facilitated by the flexible organisation of online tools. A first version of Politikzyklus will be presented and made accessible to students and a broader public in the framework of the 175th Anniversary festivities of the University of Zurich in February 2008.
E-learning: how to transfer knowledge on democracy and promote cooperation in university teaching

In order to support teaching in political science at Swiss universities, a NCCR project is developing an e-learning course on democratic decision-making processes in the Swiss political system. This new, completely bilingual (German/French) teaching unit focuses on students at bachelor level. It will be completed in June 2008 and is seen as a model for the future transfer of research results from NCCR projects into university teaching.

Two main requirements were crucial for the project team in developing the didactic concept and the content of the e-learning course. First, the course should be useful for teachers of Swiss politics ensuring flexibility regarding class size, curriculum and the preferences of teachers. Second, the course should benefit from the possibilities of the Internet. Information should not be provided in a unidirectional way, in the sense of a digital textbook. Therefore, the course’s didactic approach emphasizes the interaction and discussion among students themselves and with the teachers.

On the basis of these guidelines the team designed a course integrating theory, case studies and exercises using real world data on democratic decision-making processes in Switzerland. This has resulted in a teaching unit of 14 weeks (1 semester), which fits well into the bachelor curriculum of political science studies. Students work on a case in groups, studying the process of a political decision taken at federal level in the past 10 years. The course is divided into three modules, following a didactically progressive order of description, theoretical reflection and comparison.

In the first module, students gather information about the case from various online resources provided by the federal authorities and summarize them in a written overview. In the second module, students analyze and classify the case according to theoretical concepts about democratic decision making and the institutional context. This part is designed as a digital questionnaire, and the information is stored in an internal course database. In the third module, students work on a research question by comparing their own case with other cases. For this, the internal database of all cases reconstructed in the course will be used. With more courses held at different universities this database will get richer in the future and provide new resources for teaching and research.

Discussion and evaluation of the course work is based on a peer-review process. Two student groups work on the same case. At the end of each part, the groups review each other’s work. This review process, supervised by the teacher, is a learning process for the students; and also a quality control since it ensures greater reliability of the course’s database.

After two successful tests in summer 2007, at the universities of Zurich and Geneva, the course is now ready to be integrated into the curriculum of various universities. The evaluation results are very encouraging: the learning objectives were mainly achieved, and the feedback from teachers and students was generally positive. They appreciated the form, structure and content of the course, and particularly liked the flexibility of work.

The experiences made during the development of the e-learning course show that inter-university research networks like the NCCR Democracy are well suited for the development of teaching resources to be shared by different universities. The project benefited from the broad network of political science teachers in the NCCR, their specialized knowledge and the already established channels of communication and collaboration. E-learning corresponds very well to this network structure and has a high potential for inter-university collaboration in academic teaching as it enables students from different universities and disciplines to work together in mixed learning groups.

As a consequence, the project team’s vision for the NCCR’s future strategy of knowledge transfer on democracy is to further focus on e-learning for the transfer of research results into academic teaching. This also implies the accumulation of knowledge about e-learning and fostering academic teaching through networks, and establishing a sustainable support structure for teaching on democracy.

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Democracy and the Internet: opportunities and risks of smart-voting

The rapid development of modern information and communication technologies over the past decade is likely to have significant effects on the functioning of modern liberal democracies. One example is internet solutions that allow citizens to match their political preferences with the policies of specific parties and candidates during electoral campaigns. These electronic decision-making tools have already been used in several European countries for some years; however, till now their impact on democracy has not been assessed. Two NCCR projects identify the opportunities and risks associated with these tools from a political science and legal perspective.

Electronic candidate-evaluation tools are intended to inform voters about the political positions of the candidate and thus help them to decide. In Switzerland, the best known and most sophisticated decision-making tool for voters is smartvote, a website developed by NCCR researchers. Smartvote was offered to candidates, parties and voters for the first time in the run-up to the 2003 national elections, and subsequently in various communal and cantonal (regional) elections. In the national elections in October 2007, smartvote achieved a new record regarding its use by candidates as well as by voters. About 85% of the more than 3,200 candidates answered the questionnaire on the website and revealed thereby their policy preferences. Compared with 2003, when about 255,000 voting recommendations were generated, the user rate was four times higher in 2007. Between 28 June and the Election Day on 21 October 2007 smartvote produced more than 963,000 voting recommendations to Swiss voters. This is, compared with the 2.3 million voters who went to the polls, a remarkable number.

This remarkable success raises a series of questions about the risks and opportunities for voters, candidates, political parties and for democracy in general if the use of websites like smartvote will further increase in the future. Within NCCR Democracy, two research projects address these questions.

The project “smart-voting” – composed of political scientists, geographers and IT specialists – is examining the impact of smart-voting on elections as a central element of democracy: Who is using smartvote and which groups are over- and underrepresented? Is there a “digital divide” and if yes, is it closing over the years? What is the influence of smartvote on voters’ decisions? Are voters better informed? Do candidates and political parties answer honestly or strategically? What are the consequences for political parties? And finally, can smartvote strengthen democracy by making politics more visible and accessible, by increasing political accountability and responsiveness, and by increasing the interest of the citizens in politics?

In order to answer these questions the research team will use data from the smartvote website and from several surveys they have been conducting among voters and candidates after election campaigns. First results will be available in the second half of 2008. The research team expects that the results will influence ongoing projects of local, cantonal and national authorities in Switzerland to introduce e-voting.

The project “Judging candidates in e-democracy” – composed of legal scholars at the University of Bern – deals with the legal aspects of smart-voting. The project has been researching whether electronic candidate evaluation tools are compatible with the fundamental right to free and unadulterated opinion formation guaranteed by the Swiss Federal Constitution. They came to the conclusion that insofar as electronic-evaluation tools are operated by private actors and in no way associated with the State, their use is fundamentally protected by the freedom of opinion. However, false information that one-sidedly
influences opinion formation preceding elections is against the Constitution. In order to avoid the risks of manipulating opinion formation, candidate-evaluation tools should be legally required to be transparent regarding their sponsor, financing and methodology – conditions that, according to the legal scholars, are fulfilled by smartvote.

As the Swiss Constitution guarantees political parties a special role in the electoral process, the research team has also studied how far these guarantees are incompatible with the use of electronic candidate-evaluation tools in elections. Their results to date show that, as these tools achieve a higher user rate, individual political positions play a greater role than party affiliation. Competing therefore with party lists in proportional elections, these tools should also offer voting by list as an option. Moreover, shifts in the political representation are foreseeable. There are no institutional safeguards to ensure that politicians once elected actually support the positions they declared. Thus they can strategically use candidate-evaluation tools for their own purposes. Therefore, the researchers suggest that the tools should also involve a control of the voting behaviour of politicians while in office (so-called ratings).

Due to these findings, and regarding the opportunities for e-voting, the “smart-voting” team identifies at least two areas for additional research and development. First, voting-assistance tools in the future will focus more on voting lists that can be sent to the polls electronically. The voting act therefore will be transferred to the Internet. A potential voter entering the smartvote website receives all the information material needed to vote and can choose between an open list and party lists. The list can be filled in according to the possibilities offered by the Swiss electoral law. At the end of the selection process the voters will have the complete list of candidates they would like to vote for. This will not only make voting-assistance tools even more popular, but also offers a unique possibility to study voting behaviour. Second, one of the shortcomings of the smartvote matching system is that it is based on trust. The voters cannot be sure whether candidates once elected will actually support the positions declared in the smartvote questionnaire. A monitoring system that holds a candidate’s votes on the record (roll-call voting) would make strategic answering more hazardous and probably increase accountability and responsiveness of the candidates.

How does smartvote work?
Smartvote is a voting assistance website consisting of three main elements: the smartvote module with an issue-matching system, a comprehensive database module providing information on all candidates running for office, and an analysis module with elaborated analytical tools for visualisation of political positions.

The most important module is the smartvote issue-matching system. Its design and functionality is very simple. In a first step candidates running for office can reveal their policy preferences by answering up to 70 questions on political issues. These answers are saved in a database. In a second step voters can visit the smartvote website and answer the same questionnaire as the candidates did before. Then, the smartvote issue-matching algorithm compares their answers with the propositions of the candidates and outputs a list of all candidates in the voter’s constituency in descending rank according to their issue congruence with the individual voter.

Publications


“Smart-voting” project
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Narration as a key factor for knowledge transfer

Scientists are generally expected to transfer their knowledge into society in order to legitimize their research and the public funding they receive. Journalists play an important role in disseminating research. For a successful interaction between them and scientists, the establishment of networks, trust and common understanding are crucial factors. But how can this be achieved? This is one of the core questions the NCCR project “Narrative Space” is dealing with.

Scientists and journalists belong to different professional communities with different professional norms and social practices, and define problems in the framework of their own rules and routines. The different system logics cause particular difficulties in communication and knowledge transfer processes between scientists and journalists.

This fact is supported by the results of interviews conducted with ten NCCR Democracy researchers on their relations with the media. Although the need for communication between science and society is seen as an important task, the researchers do not often engage in communication outside the science system. The reasons stated are lack of time or incentives. Scientific reputation mainly depends on communication within the science system itself.

However, one of the NCCR Democracy’s intentions is to improve democratic processes and institutions; therefore successful knowledge transfer must be an inherent part of the research program, and should not happen by chance but be actively supported. It goes without saying that sending well-written press releases to journalists is not sufficient. In this case, scientists cannot influence what happens with the information they provide, and knowledge transfer completely underlies the rules of the media system: research results are presented in a shortened and simplified form, and the emphasis is on facts and figures.

The project “Narrative Space” assumes that one precondition for successful knowledge transfer is that it is seen as an interactive process between all participants instead of a one-way transaction from the knowledge producers to society. This assumption is supported by NCCR researchers whose experiences in collaborating with journalists have been positive: they profit from an existing network and a trusting and respectful cooperation. In contrast, younger researchers lacking already established networks have had less good experiences with the media.

For successful knowledge transfer, scientists and journalists do not have to give up their rules and practices. Rather they need to find a shared understanding of their relationship. An interactive and reflexive communication process between equal participants needs a common space – which the project team names “narrative space”, a concept that is known from knowledge management and organisational learning. Narrative knowledge represents a specific form of knowledge which has an its self-legitimating character. And therefore it is independent of specific system logic and can be shared by all.

In order to put the concept into practice, the project team is organizing and mediating joint meetings with NCCR researchers and journalists during which the participants develop a mutual understanding and common story lines concerning the subject of the research projects. One particular challenge, for example, is to link the story of the individual project with the NCCR’s meta-trends of mediatization and denationalization. Researchers and journalists tell their story of their respective research interests, their motivations and their view of their role in society. Then methods of narration help to identify their common interests and approaches, but also differences between them. Through their joint efforts, researchers and journalists will finally realize their common interest. Within this organized narrative space, the common stories function as a kick-off for the interactive transfer process.

Michael Schanne, Iris Giovanelli and Vinzenz Wyss.

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“Hin und weg” – changing career from academia to the public/private sector and back

Career planning in the social sciences is of central concern to the NCCR peer-mentoring group Stepping Stone. At the University of Zurich in June 2007, the group organized a panel discussion with political scientists to address the possibilities, challenges and hurdles of career change from academia to the public or private sector, and vice versa. Central questions were: How can skills and knowledge in the social sciences be used to work in non-academic settings? What hurdles does one encounter when returning to academia after having pursued a career in the public/private sector?

Georg Lutz, senior lecturer at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Bern, chaired a fruitful discussion with Giulia Brogini Künzi (currently employed by the Swiss National Intelligence Center, Fedpol), Daniel Oesch (visiting lecturer at the Institute of Political Science of the Universities of Geneva and Zurich, and Secretary General of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, SGB), Martin Senti (editor at the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, NZZ), and Adrian Vatter (Professor of policy analysis and political theory at the University of Konstanz, and founder of the consulting agency Büro Vatter).

The panellists shared their experience on how academic training and expertise in the social sciences could be an asset beyond academia, and also addressed possible difficulties of returning to academia after having been active in a non-academic setting. While all of the panellists appeared to be very satisfied in their current position, be it in academia or in the public/private sector, their views on whether it was actually possible to plan such a “mixed” career, combining an academic background with a more practically oriented professional life, were rather diverse.

Daniel Oesch emphasized the advantage of having a second foothold outside academia while pursuing an academic career, despite the double-burden. Given that the academic job market was rather unpredictable, such a two-track approach would be worth the extra effort. As Adrian Vatter’s career shows, engaging in extra-university work (in his case scientific policy advice and consulting) may also just be a matter of making a virtue out of necessity.

The discussion was Stepping Stone’s first public event, after a series of successful workshops, internal meetings and training sessions mainly aimed at developing additional skills for advancing the group members’ careers. It was organized in collaboration with the peer group Politikplus of the Center for Comparative and International Studies at ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich. Stepping Stone therefore had the possibility to draw on their fellow group’s expertise in organizing public events. Given the success of this panel discussion, Stepping Stone is planning a follow-up event for the coming year. Further information will be available on the group’s website (www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch/nccr/peer_mentoring) in due course.
News in brief

Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) evaluates NCCR Democracy

At the end of September 2007, the SNSF Review Panel, consisting of ten experts in political and communication science, came together in Zurich for a two-day site visit to evaluate NCCR Democracy’s research progress. On the basis of the presentations given and the progress report the NCCR submitted in June, the Panel assessed the work of the NCCR and gave valuable recommendations for the future development of the research program.

The Panel very much appreciated the NCCR’s position paper, which lays down the central conceptual grounds of the research and its position in the recent scientific debate on democracy. The position paper has been published as Working Paper No. 7 and can be downloaded from the NCCR Website. The experts also acknowledged that there has clearly been progress in interdisciplinary collaboration over the last year. However, it will continue to be a challenge in the future. The promotion of young researchers and the advancement of women were in the focus of this year’s site visit. The Panel was particularly pleased by the scientific quality and intellectual capacity of the NCCR’s doctoral students and post-docs, and also by the peer-mentoring program. The experts will evaluate the NCCR again in September 2008.

NCCR Democracy annual conference

On 26/27 October this year, the NCCR’s second annual conference took place in the Bernese Oberland. NCCR members presented and discussed their research results over two days, and also discussed plans for future research in the NCCR in a possible second funding phase (2009–2013). The flexible format of the conference promoted exchange between the individual projects and modules, and across the disciplines. Communication scientists Barbara Pfetsch and Christiane Eilders, and political scientists Ulrike Liebert and Laurence Morel, enriched the discussions as external experts and gave valuable and stimulating suggestions and ideas.

Calendar of events

Parcours of knowledge – 175th anniversary of Zurich University
Exhibition & public lectures, 8–16 March 2008, Sechseläutenplatz, Zurich

Open day Center for Democracy (ZDA) Aarau
12 April 2008, Center for Democracy, Villa Blumenhalde, Aarau

The news media in peace and conflict: towards a more general theory
Public lecture, 16 April 2008, 18:15–19:45, University of Zurich
Prof. Gadi Wolfsfeld, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Immigration, cultural heterogeneity and the implications for democracy
Public panel discussion / NCCR Democracy general assembly meeting
17 April 2008, 18:15–20:00
University of Zurich, Aula KOL G 201

1st World Conference on Direct Democracy
22–24 May 2008, Lucerne, Culture and Congress Center