Online services and social media play an increasingly important role in everyday life. Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter and Co. have radically changed private and professional communication over the past years. Their potential impact on participation in urban development and planning, however, has so far not been fully explored, although they are already being employed by both municipalities (Horelli/Sadoway 2014) and urban movements (Höfler 2014). Some expect this to lead to a “subversive urban planning” (Streich 2014) which means that bottom-up initiatives engaged in informal urbanism are attributed a much more important role in urban development. In Germany, most planning departments use the internet for information on recent projects on a regular basis, while online services and social media are still much less common and often tested only in model projects, due not least to a lack of staff, resources and knowledge. Private planning agencies and design research centres such as Zebralog and Polidia have specialized in the development of tools to combine on-site and online participation in local development contexts and provide customized strategies for particular local settings. But online services and social media are not only employed by planners: Urban protest movements and civic initiatives also make use of Facebook and online services when they organise their resistance or support of urban development matters, particularly when it comes to hot topics such as large infrastructure projects or gentrification.

There are still many open questions with regard to the impact of these developments for participation in urban development and to the related risks and opportunities. On the one hand, online services and social media may open up new participatory spaces that are open to many different social groups and could make diverse perspectives on the city visible and negotiable. Thus, these spaces might broaden the opportunities for democratic dialogue. The co-production of space (Albrechts 2013) can be tested in new constellations (Björgvinsson et. al 2012; Schneidewind/Scheck 2013). As a consequence, it might be expected that participation changes when local outreach formats are combined with virtual platforms, Facebook or WhatsApp, and that they could become more interactive and dialogue-oriented (e. g. via virtual town hall meetings or design-thinking workshops). They also make it easier for urban movements to express their opinions and mobilize communities for the promotion of common goals. On the other hand, the use of social media and online services in municipalities needs some prerequisites, not least staff with time, knowledge and technical resources. Their general environmental impact in terms of energy and resources is often forgotten. In municipalities in austerity mode, the costs may override the benefits. The “dark side” in terms of data protection and the danger of a “smart dictatorship” (Welzer 2016) regularly causes unease. Smart mobs might produce biased decisions and reorganize power relations in favour of “the loudest” instead of enhancing democratic exchange.

The M-project is expected to address opportunities and/or risks of social media and online services for participation processes in urban planning. A broad spectrum of research questions is possible, for example: What experiences have been made so far? Who benefits? Do the tools that are developed in this context really make planning procedures more democratic and inclusive? In what
ways do different national, local and cultural contexts influence the openness of planning institutions towards these tools? What is the impact on urban governance? What resources are involved? What is the environmental impact? The role and attitudes of planners towards these developments might also be an interesting topic. Studies that focus on different parts of the world and/or on different types of cities and planning projects may be particularly instructive.

The aim of the M-project is to shed light on the impact of social media and online services on urban planning and participation. Students are expected to analyse the state of current research, develop their own research question and design and conduct an empirical study which will most likely be qualitative rather than quantitative. Experience in empirical research is helpful, but no prerequisite.

Literatur


