

CASE STUDY: ASHOKA NEWS & KNOWLEDGE FELLOW GREGOR HACKMACK (GERMANY)



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The Communications Architect: Enabling Public Dialog to Advance Democracy

Ideas that disrupt the status quo often have ripple effects and consequences. Gregor Hackmack and fellow activists in Hamburg, Germany, realized this after winning a hard-fought fight for electoral reform. They sought to empower voters by changing the way members of the state parliament, the *Bürgerschaft*, were elected. Yet the success of this reform revealed a new challenge: how would citizens, whose only option in the past was to vote for a party slate, be able to make informed choices about individual candidates? Gregor and a collaborator, Boris Hekeler, knew that the electorate would need access to information that, at the time, was simply not available. They also realized that the true hurdle was more than just about disseminating information—what was needed was

a way for citizens and the politicians who represented them to engage in a public dialog that promoted transparency and accountability.

Historically, the electoral system in Germany gave political parties a great deal of power to determine how legislative seats would be filled. At the national level, the system provides citizens two votes that: one to be cast for individuals vying to represent a constituency and one vote to be cast for a party. The Federal parliament's 622 seats are divided using complex formulas that result in individual winners from the constituencies taking seats from direct votes and more than half the seats apportioned based on vote totals won by each political party. In practice, many candidates who lose in the direct vote

end up being awarded seats because party bosses include them as part of the proportional vote totals. Each of Germany's 16 states until recently relied on similar systems. Many believe this system has contributed to voter apathy and dissatisfaction.¹

Hamburg's referendum in 2004 changed this on a local level, giving citizens more power to elect candidates as well as vote people out of office. Suddenly, it became much more crucial for voters to know where individual candidates stood on important issues, and there was a new opportunity to hold office-holders directly accountable for their actions. None of the major stakeholders, however, was prepared to address this need. The public was used to being uninformed and had no precedent for seeking and using information about parliamentary candidate positions. The politicians, meanwhile, were also left without established mechanisms for communicating with and hearing from constituents. Media also were used to relying on party and ruling government spokespeople as sources; they literally had access to "the party line," but little experience exploring and disseminating information about individual candidates.

Gregor and Boris saw this gap and, together, developed a simple yet radically innovative solution: *Abgeordnetenwatch* (Parliament Watch) was conceived as a neutral, online platform that would foster direct citizen-politician dialog, track politicians' public positions and votes to hold them accountable, and promote this information through established media. A new platform for advancing citizen-focused democracy was born.

Quick Traction with Three Core Strategies

The foundation of Parliament Watch is direct question and answer between politicians and constituents, stripping away the filters and simplifications of talking points and media analysis. Every member of parliament is given an online profile. Constituents are able to submit concise questions and politicians are able, if they choose, to re-

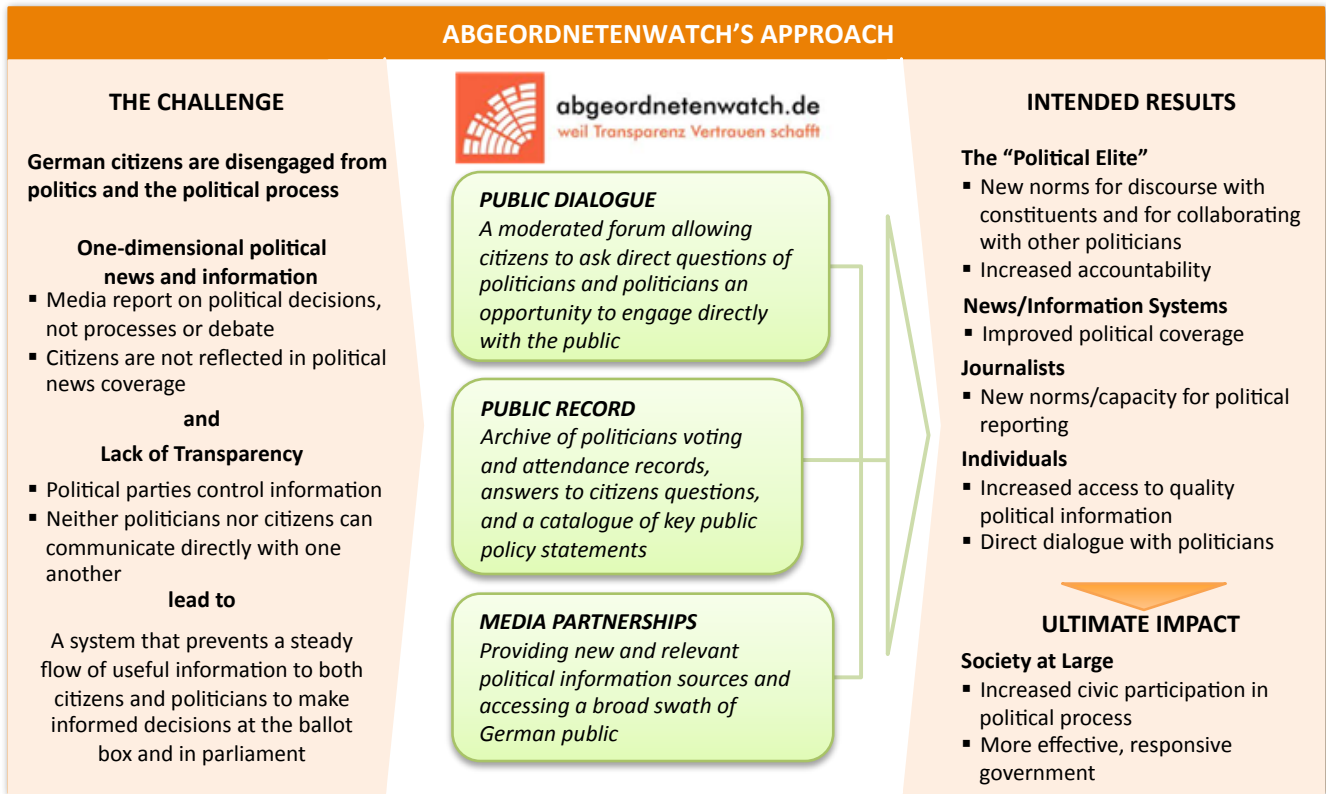
spond publicly. The opportunity for direct exchange is one of the things that makes Parliament Watch unique in comparison with other monitoring projects. "People have had no way of doing this before," notes Federal Parliament member Burkhardt Müller-Sönksen. "You don't think as a normal citizen to ask [questions of] your member of parliament, but if you have a platform like *Abgeordnetenwatch*, the barrier is lower."

The Q&A forum is complemented by a second, related strategy: a permanent catalog of MP attendance, voting records and key policy statements. Gregor refers to this part of the platform as "the voters' memory." "You get from different sources the information you need about politicians and their decisions bundled in one database," explains Dr. Erwin Stahl, an executive at BonVenture, which was an early investor in the platform. "Having that is a wonderful thing. It is like gold that has not [yet] been dug up."

Third, Parliament Watch has pursued a deliberate strategy to leverage, rather than circumvent, existing media channels. They position themselves as sources, believing that their primary value is as information aggregators, not distributors to end users. Journalists are becoming familiar with Parliament Watch's data and are able to cite it in articles, and strategic partnerships with major media offer the resource through their online portals. "Parliament Watch is not a website you turn to everyday," Gregor insists. "In fact, most users are confronted with Parliament Watch through another front, for example *Spiegel Online*. It may be the case that they think they are reaching a *Spiegel* project rather than Parliament Watch, but the object is to have many people presented with the information."

All three strategies have demonstrated traction and rapidly increasing reach. What began in 2004 as a volunteer effort by 2007 was ready to formally launch as a two-charter combination of social enterprise and nonprofit entities which, under German tax law, allows Parliament Watch the broadest set of financial and operating advan-

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tages. By the time Gregor was elected as an Ashoka News & Knowledge Fellow, in 2008, citizens had asked more than 12,000 questions of their representatives. Since that time, the cumulative number of questions asked has jumped past 100,000. Last year more than four million unique visitors came to the site, and today Parliament Watch has grown to cover five of the 16 German state parliaments, the Federal Parliament and German representation in the parliament of the European Union.

Equally impressive is the response rate from MPs. More than 80% of submitted questions have been answered, and 95% of MPs from the covered parliaments actively participate in the system. Regardless of each MP’s participation, Parliament Watch gathers and publishes MP attendance and voting information that is publicly available but would be difficult for most citizens and labor-intensive even for journalists to secure.

Among the most significant achievements since the formal launch has been the establishment of strategic partnerships with mass media outlets, including state radio and television, more than three dozen regional newspapers, and one of the nation’s largest weekly magazines, *Der Spiegel*. With a print circulation of over one million

and a prominent online presence, *Der Spiegel* is the biggest print media publication in its market and is known for its political reporting.² In what has become its closest partnership, Parliament Watch regularly develops new and creative concepts for making its data accessible to *Spiegel Online* users, while the media giant’s web programmers implement the ideas. For example, in January, 2011, *Spiegel Online* launched a card game meant to entertain users while conveying key statistics about their parliamentary representatives and let users know they can ask direct questions of their elected officials.

For Gregor and his team, the shift in the media marketplace is as significant. “We reach a lot of journalists who in the past would have just turned to the government, and now turn to us as a source of information for stories.” A search of select print media shows that coverage specifically referencing Parliament Watch has shot up in the last three years, reaching a high of more than 150 articles during the 2009 federal election year. In one month alone Parliament Watch provoked more than three dozen articles when they released data and graded MPs on their response rate to citizen questions. “I see the press using it as a source,” notes Federal MP Müller-Sönksen. “Sometimes journalists give me a call and ask

me why I said one thing one year ago and I just did [something else].”

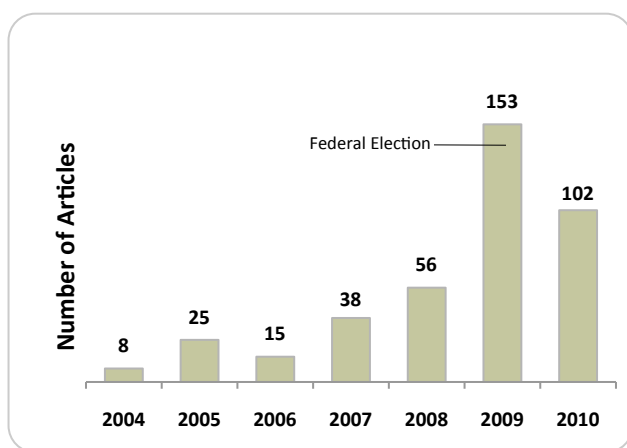
Parliament Watch’s 30,000 regular subscribers are what Gregor calls a “political information elite”—journalists, political commentators, party leaders and politicians. They have the potential to re-communicate or leverage the information with wide impact. Simultaneously, the website receives between 6,000 and 10,000 unique visitors daily, depending in part on the elections cycle. Much of this audience is made of up the electorate, and Parliament Watch’s own demographic assessments show that one-third of its users are first-time voters, many of them young people.

Impact: Creating a New Political Culture

Not everyone welcomed the change in information flow and dialog. Hamburg MP Alexander-Martin Sardina in 2008 wrote about Parliament Watch’s reception in the halls of power: “Abgeordnetenwatch often was a topic for discussion in the CDU [ruling party Christian Democratic Union] parliamentary group meetings. . . . The mood in the spring and summer of 2005 was that only the party speaker should answer for their respective issues. . . . There was also a group of representatives that insisted that the only proper forum for debate was Parliament, not an independent internet site.” Staff attorneys for one state parliament were asked to advise MPs whether Parliament Watch could be held legally liable for generating bad publicity.³

Despite resistance from the political establishment, over

MAJOR MEDIA CITATIONS OF PARLIAMENT WATCH⁴



time individual MPs came to see Parliament Watch as something that benefitted them. Many MPs closely watch not just the questions posed to them, but those directed to other leaders. “Questions are incentives to get informed about topics that they know little about,” Gregor argues. “The MPs scan topics on our site to look for ideas and [opportunities] for things to do. They get inspiration from others’ answers, and they can also get a sense of potential coalition partners.” From a purely pragmatic standpoint, Parliament Watch gives politicians a low-cost way to directly access large numbers of voters. “It is one of the only chances to get to know the people in my constituency,” notes Federal MP Rüdiger Kruse. “There are 187,000 people [in my district], and you cannot meet and greet [all of them].” MPs also appreciate the opportunity for unfiltered dialog. Notes Hamburg MP Sardina, “An MP who is one of 121 [in Hamburg] hardly has a regular platform of their own, and when they do, it is on a very limited basis, and sometimes [they are] even misquoted.”

Direct dialog between politician and constituent is both a reflection and driver of an important shift in the German political landscape. The 2004 referendum that changed the electoral process in Hamburg has gained momentum in other states and more recently at the Federal level, where constitutional courts have issued rulings that are accelerating the shift away from party-centered politics.⁵ “It is hard to say we influenced this trend,” Gregor cautions, “but there is a general trend and atmosphere for citizen engagement in politics. We have provoked a shift in focus away from just government to parliament. Even though it is still not the case that all Germans know their Member of Parliament, it is growing greatly. The media will now feature the voting records of members. In the past media coverage was framed as ‘the government decided,’ and now it is focused on individual voting.” A study by the Federal Parliament confirms that the electorate is paying more attention and becoming more informed about issues earlier in the decision-making process—before laws are passed as opposed to when they are being implemented.⁶

“Parliament Watch has contributed to a major change in self-perception among MPs,” Gregor emphasizes. “They are realizing that they are employees of the people. Each MP has a voice and can communicate with the people. It reduces party power structure and empowers individual

actors.” Nonetheless, an observer of these structural changes to the political discourse in Germany may wonder: if voters are better informed and more engaged, and if the process is more transparent, are these shifts driving different results in terms of government policies and actions? Gregor cautions that “it is always difficult to relate a certain policy decision to a single cause,” but takes pride in several concrete examples where Parliament Watch fueled public conversations which in turn led to changed policies. In one case, a plan for MPs to raise their own salaries for a second time in less than six months became a hot topic after citizens began questioning their representatives. As a result, the story became more widely reported and party leaders ended up abandoning the pay-raise plan. In a pre-Parliament Watch media environment, news about MP pay raises likely would have gone unreported until after it was a done deal. Similarly, data available on Parliament Watch in 2010 revealed a string of absences by a prominent MP who was earning fees from outside speaking engagements instead of doing the work for which he had been elected. Within two months his own party publicly called for reform to regulate outside earnings.

Success Factors and Challenges

Parliament Watch’s success is predicated on trust. An experienced and active member in the direct democracy movement, Gregor knew the site had to be seen as objective and neutral, and that they needed a way to ensure users could not abuse the platform for political purposes.

Questions directed to elected officials would have to be screened to ensure they were neither biased attacks nor coordinated propaganda. Gregor’s partner, Boris, a programming expert who develops the infrastructure for the site, helped create a mechanism for moderating the dialog.

The Q&A portion of the platform has very **strict moderation protocol**, codified to ensure nobody uses the platform to lobby, slander or personally attack politicians or make racist statements. Parliament Watch’s team of five full-time staff is supported by 15 part-time, paid moderators who screen all questions. Questions can be asked only once and must be framed neutrally. A detailed electronic record of moderator decisions is kept and reviewed by peers. Overseeing the entire process and intervening in rare cases is an ethics board made up of journalists, federal judges, academics and other respected professionals. Without this level of rigor to ensure a fair dialog, members of parliament would be unwilling to engage. “There is only one way to do [this type of neutral platform] correctly,” observes Federal MP Rüdiger Kruse. “It is not important whether you yourself are left wing or liberal or conservative.” Any lack of objectivity would be quickly recognized, he argues, “and then you would be out of business very, very fast.”

Another critical success factor has been the **widespread adoption by MPs**, without which Parliament Watch would lose its core content. Gregor began in Hamburg by approaching individual MPs who, as lower-ranking party

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE

STARTUP

PILOT

GROWTH

MATURITY

AS OF 02/01/2011 (7 YEARS AFTER LAUNCH):



abgeordnetenwatch.de
weil Transparenz Vertrauen schafft

REACH

- Monitors Federal Parliament, German representatives to the E.U. Parliament, and members of 5 state parliaments
- 4 million unique site visitors per year
- Through media partnerships, all German markets are covered

IMPACT

- 100,000 questions asked and 80,000 answered, cumulatively
- 95% of MPs participate
- 40% of questioners on PW have never previously contacted a politician
- 397 articles in major print media with mentions of PW between 2004 and 2010⁴
- Trusted resource – citizens, politicians, and journalists all view PW as a source for public data and moderated dialogue

SYSTEMS CHANGE

- Barriers to quality information and active civic participation are diminished
- New norms among the “political elite”: direct dialog with constituents and a new way of collaborating with other politicians
- More interest in direct democracy is contributing to changes in electoral processes
 - 2 states have changed voting systems, giving voters more direct say in who is elected

members, had more to gain from a system that enabled direct engagement with constituents. Politicians who were younger in their careers—and more comfortable with internet-based communications—became early adopters. After initial reservations and concerns about Parliament Watch’s political agenda were allayed, the upsides of participation motivated many other MPs to join. Persistent promotion of the effort, including published ratings that reveal which MPs do not engage, has helped to create a new norm where Parliament Watch is embraced. “The colleagues of mine who say they will not answer do not do themselves a favor,” argues Müller-Sönksen.

A third critical factor for success—one which most stakeholders feel needs to be further developed—is the **partnerships with established media**. Through this work, Parliament Watch has fueled increased coverage of the political process, official decisions, and greater transparency. Premium partners such as *Der Spiegel* offer access to audiences and help build Parliament Watch’s credibility and visibility. Going forward, one critical challenge for the organization is how to further expand and leverage these media relationships, particularly with broadcast media. They have had some exposure through one-off coverage on television (mostly through a regular stream of invitations for Gregor to appear on talk shows), but their hope is to create a sustained partnership with a major show. Currently, their biggest presence is online, but the visibility offered by broadcast media would elevate Parliament Watch’s role in the public conversation about direct democracy. They also are trying to get better at working with journalists to help them use Parliament Watch data: a blog they began during the 2009 elections and the system of “grading” MPs on their Q&A response rate are both techniques directed at journalists looking for high-impact story ideas. “We do some investigative journalism on our blog to show the potential of our data,” Gregor explains. “It is to inspire. We use it strategically.”

Parliament Watch’s ability to engage MPs and major media is in part a reflection of Gregor’s **leadership**. He is widely regarded as innovator and social entrepreneur whose charisma and passion attract others. He is an exceptional public face, and he is matched with an equally passionate business partner, Boris Hekele, who brings essential operational and technical know-how. “Gregor has to lead this and push it and be convincing about the project,” argues Federal MP Müller-Sönksen. “I think he is capable of this. . . . He has the potential to be a big player.”

The organization’s **funding model** is both a strength and, as is often the case with public interest efforts, an

area that needs continued focus. The philanthropic sector in Germany is underdeveloped and historically avoids political projects. Instead, operations were initially supported with an investment by BonVenture, a German social venture capital firm. Structured as a

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ten-year loan, the investment allowed Parliament Watch to begin a planned expansion that eventually will reach all 16 German state parliaments in addition to the Federal European parliaments (German members), which are already covered. To sustain itself, however, Parliament Watch relies on donations from over 2,000 members of the public, more than half of whom are funder-subscribers each contributing an average of €8-10 monthly. Revenues from advertising and sales of premium profiles in the run-up to elections supplement donations. The organization reached a break-even point in March, 2010, and is now working to build up a reserve. Gregor estimates that the initial investment required to move sustainably into a new state is roughly €10,000, and this is the goal they have set to raise before each future expansion. Within the next two years they intend to be active with all 16 German state parliaments, and also want to explore adding municipal-level governing bodies.

Expansion raises other long-term challenges. At the moment the platform is partially automated but depends

THE ASHOKA NEWS & KNOWLEDGE FELLOWSHIP

“Ashoka has proved to be the most valuable network for the development of Parliament Watch so far,” Gregor Hackmack argues. “It has been the driving factor in scaling and expanding this project.”

When he was selected as a News & Knowledge Fellow, in 2008, Gregor gained access to a variety of resources designed to support him personally and professionally as an innovator and entrepreneur. Through Ashoka, he has accessed pro bono business and strategy planning from McKinsey that resulted in a stronger organizational structure and a plan for more focused expansion. As part of this, Parliament Watch produced its first professional annual report. Through Ashoka, Gregor also was invited to attend the Skoll World Forum in Oxford and the Center for Future Civic Media gathering in Cambridge, connecting him to new networks of innovators.

Ashoka connected Gregor to local partners who made the first attempt to seed Parliament Watch as a pilot effort in Ireland.

Although the initial effort stalled, a new launch in Ireland is underway, housed in Ashoka’s offices there. Ashoka also has been instrumental in connecting Gregor with potential partners and funders in the U.S., including at National Public Radio, with whom he is now partnering on a U.S.-based project entered in the Knight Foundation’s Knight News Challenge grant process. More recently, a meeting has been set up to connect Parliament Watch with Google engineers to explore potential strategic technology projects.

Gregor identifies Ashoka as leading to self-perceptual changes. He views himself differently, actively participates in the Ashoka network and provides support and insight to other social entrepreneurs. Indeed, it is because of Ashoka that Gregor has come to believe that “in order to unfold the full impact, we have to go global. [We need to] ensure that this local idea will spread to other countries and thus become truly system-changing.”

on a team of paid moderators. Parliament Watch relies on these moderators to maintain its impartial position, but this adds cost and limits scalability. One idea they may explore is to adopt a Wikipedia-type model (e.g., crowd-sourcing), but this inevitably would introduce a new set of risks that would need to be managed. “We are looking to having more users involved in the project,” Gregor emphasizes, “but do not want to lose the independence of the project.”

Three opportunistic attempts to expand internationally have offered tough lessons. Parliament Watch aligned with groups in Luxembourg and Austria and also has a pilot in Ireland. Initial promise gave way to strategic and operational disagreements: owners of the Austrian project decided to sell the enterprise to a news agency, and according to Gregor “the original spirit is lost.” Meanwhile, the Luxembourg effort is strongly aligned in terms of purpose but has become a financial drain. “They are great activists” Gregor says, “but bad fundraisers.” He believes Parliament Watch should consolidate and mature in its own market before attempting an expansion, and then

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develop an intentional plan for strategic international expansion and a framework for choosing partners who bring the right level of commitment and resources. International expansion is still a priority: there are many parliamentary systems around Europe, and there have been inquiries about licensing the platform from media outlets in the United States.

Expanding Parliament Watch’s Influence

Parliament Watch’s biggest opportunity is to leverage its early successes in order to become a more prominent player on the political landscape. “In our specific field, parliament, yes we are a thought leader,” Gregor observes, “but not around politics in general. We are not yet a household name like Greenpeace. So far we are too small to run big campaigns and instead rely on being invited onto talk shows, or need to come up with stories [to draw media attention]. We don’t yet have the capacity to reach all the potential stakeholders or users of Parliament Watch.” The priority is to get more public attention.

BonVenture's Dr. Erwin Stahl also envisions a much higher public profile for Parliament Watch. "I am sure they will become a organization like Amnesty International—an organization that you must go to if you want information on a topic—but it just takes time. I would say there are two keys: One, use the information they gather in [closer] cooperation with media companies. . . . Media companies would not have to pay for the information, and on the other hand *Abgeordnetenwatch* would become more well known. And two, bring the technology into the international arena." Gregor agrees: "We are a leader for this strategy but do not have a high-enough profile [internationally], in part because we do not operate in English."

The trajectory for Parliament Watch is promising. They have financial stability, a plan for intentional expansion within Germany and an understanding of the complexities they will need to grapple with before further pursuing international expansion. Meanwhile, the states where the organization first began work are entering their second or even third election cycles, creating opportunities to demonstrate the value of a public-record dialog. Politicians who have made unrealistic promises are being called on to defend discrepancies between their positions and their votes, and are becoming motivated to be more honest and transparent. At the same time, political leaders are able to build meaningful connections with constituents and focus debate on substantive issues. An entire civic conversation has been created where there was only one-way, tightly controlled communication in the past. Assuming Gregor and his team can continue to expand this new conversation, the potential to reshape the system of democracy in Germany—and electoral politics around the globe—is profound.

Visit Parliament Watch on the web at abgeordnetenwatch.de.

Case Study Methods

A professional evaluator from LFA Group: *Learning for Action* spent 4 days in Hamburg and Munich working with local research partner Kathrin Voss, Ph.D., lecturer at the University of Hamburg, specializing in political and internet communication, to collect the following data for this case study:

- A total of 9 key informant interviews with 6 different stakeholders, including two members of the German Bundestag; one member of the Hamburg Bürgerschaft; a representative from Bon Venture, a major funder of Abgeordnetenwatch; representatives from media partners; a professor of political science at the University of Hamburg; a journalist; and staff and board members of the Abgeordnetenwatch team.
- A survey of 3,315 questioners that put a question to a political representative and received an answer. 323 responded to the survey.
- Review of the Abgeordnetenwatch website, annual report, media coverage and reports on Abgeordnetenwatch, and other available materials .
- Site visit observations by a professional evaluator and lecturer from University of Hamburg.

Where data are referenced without citation, Abgeordnetenwatch is the source.

References

¹ Source: Key informant interviews.

² Source: *International Herald Tribune*.

³ Source: "38 Fragen an den Abgeordneten Sardino MdHB," www.sardina.de (March, 2008).

⁴ Source: LexisNexis.com. Includes more than 200 newspapers and magazines in its database, but only a small percentage of local and regional publications.

⁵ Source: Key informant interviews.

⁶ Source: Key informant interviews.