

Stiftungswelt

SCHÖPFLIN STIFTUNG: Mehr Demokratie-Experimente wagen

STIFTERPREIS 2019: Deutsche Bürgerstiftungen im Porträt

UMFRAGE: So demokratisch sind Stiftungen selbst

Unsere

Demokratie



Bundesverband
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StiftungsWelt: Herr Schöpflin, the promotion of democracy is one of the main priorities of the work at the Schöpflin Foundation. What prompted your interest in this issue?

Hans Schöpflin: It's something I became interested in when I was in the USA – where I lived for many years with my family. I also have a foundation in California which at the end of the 1990s was already working intensively on the issues of globalisation and how civil society can stand up to the excessive power of large corporations. Democracy is at the very heart of that debate. When I returned to Germany in 2013/14 the TTIP free-trade agreement was being negotiated and generating some very controversial public debate. Here in Lörrach too there was a panel discussion on the issue. I listened to all the discussions – and suddenly it hit me like a bolt out of the blue: this debate isn't about free trade, it's about democracy; it's about large corporations taking control of democratic processes and using them for their own ends to influence policy.

Tim Göbel: In fact, the theme of democracy runs through our foundation like a leitmotif. This is clearly demonstrated by our '*Non-Profit Journalism*' programme which looks at how we need robust media – the so-called 'fourth estate' – to support democracy. The issue is similarly apparent in our '*Economy & Democracy*' programme which deals with how best to create a balance between the interests of business on the one hand and those of citizens on the other. Equally our other two programmes - '*Schools & Development*' and '*Flight & Integration*' – also focus on democracy.

In what way?

Göbel: School is usually the first institution that children consciously experience. And what they experience at school is how people live and work together. And this is where schools play a key social role in developing a democratic community. Flight and integration meanwhile are the big issues of our time – and it is these issues that show whether a society is moving in a good or bad direction. We are often asked how our four programmes link together. The clear answer is that all of them are about democracy.

Schöpflin: Or put another way, it's all about the four Cs: collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity. The fundamental question is: how can we keep our democracy alive and ensure that young people – who, in our modern society, are subject to a huge number of different influences – analyse critically and creatively the democratic processes?

Göbel: Another aspect that forms the very foundations of our activities is the 'bottom up' principle. It is a principle that is inherent in the term democracy, when you consider that democracy translates, literally, as 'people power'. Of course, we sometimes need top-down solutions – when it comes to legislation, for example. But fundamentally we believe in solutions that come from the bottom – in other words, from us all.

So, we have schools playing a socialising role; and the media as the fourth estate in the democratic system. Given this context what, in your opinion, is the role of foundations?

Göbel: I think foundations should see themselves as a sort of midwife to democratic projects. At least that is how we see ourselves here at the Schöpflin Foundation. We often provide funding at the very early stages of projects. So, for example, we provided funding from the very beginning of the project to Kiron, a social start-up that in 2015 developed an online study programme for people with a refugee background. And similarly, we gave a grant to the citizens movement *Bürgerbewegung Finanzwende* (associated with the European NGO, Finance Watch), which was founded at the beginning of the year by the former Member of the German Parliament, Gerhard Schick, and which aims to reform the banking system. Indeed, that is one way in which we differ from other foundations which seem to see such early-stage funding as too risky.

It's interesting that you support the '*Bürgerbewegung Finanzwende*' movement. Herr Schöpflin, how do you reconcile Herr Schick's criticism of our financial system with your investor activities?

Schöpflin: There is no conflict there at all with my world view. When you consider what happened in the 2008 financial crisis (and at that time I was living in the USA), you see that Herr Schick is right and you have to agree with him. If politics has a key role to play anywhere, then it is surely here. Banks need to be regulated - from top to bottom. There's no way the banking sector can be controlled via a system of voluntary self-regulation. The sector is one of excesses: these need to be tackled and, where necessary, pursued through the courts.

Back to your Foundation: do you think the term 'midwife' – which Herr Göbel just used – is the right term?

Schöpflin: Absolutely. Another term we often use is 'start-up financing'. By the way, we don't just support long-term projects like the *Bürgerbewegung Finanzwende*; we also give grants to very short-term programmes. We very much take to heart the words of the British economist, John Maynard Keynes, who said, "In the long run, we are all dead". So, take the upcoming European elections at the end of May, for example: we've got to be damn careful that we don't leave the field wide open to right-wing populists. This is an example of a project where we need to act quickly.

Göbel: And to that end we have decided to support the mass-demonstration initiative, »*Ein Europa für Alle*« (One Europe for All), which is trying to mobilise people to take part in demonstrations and festivals in 15 European cities one week ahead of the European elections. The initiative is bound to attract many individual donations – but we felt it was also important to show that foundations support this action too.

I can imagine you had heated debates within the Foundation about whether or not to support this initiative. Who decides within the Foundation which projects will receive funding? How do you reach those decisions?

Schöpflin: Compared to other foundations we have very short decision-making procedures. It took us barely a week to decide that we would support the European demonstrations initiative. I suspect the reason for that is that, at heart, I am a donor with a warm hand instead of a cold hand.

So, do you personally make most of the decisions?

Schöpflin: Herr Göbel and I – as members of the Executive Board – take decisions together.

Göbel: It's also important to note that within the Foundation – and particularly with our programme directors – we promote a culture of intensive debate. I think it's safe to say that Herr Schöpflin and I don't take decisions in isolation or without the input of colleagues. Of course sometimes, on some issues, we take a different line from that of our programme directors: if that happens, we question the decision or even reject it. Of course, we don't accept grant applications in the traditional way.

So how does the grant system work at Schöpflin?

Göbel: We identify potential fields of activity – currently we're working on non-profit journalism, for example. Once we've identified these fields, we get stuck in. And our programme directors play a hugely important role here, because they are the people networking in their specific field and uncovering innovative ideas and exciting projects; you might say they're a bit like truffle hogs sniffing out their prize fungi.

What does 'getting stuck in' look like in reality?

Göbel: We read a lot; speak to a lot of people; go to a lot of conferences; build networks over the years – and then every now and again we meet people and organisations who we think would fit specific projects. And then we get to work with discussions, analysis of documents, and verification and test processes. But our main goal is to get a feel for the direction in which these organisations want to go, what objectives they have, and if these are people we can trust and who would like to work in partnership with us. Of course, we're actually trying to achieve the impossible, namely, to work with collaborators who are often in a very different financial position from us, but to work with them – as far as possible – as equals, despite the financial imbalance.

That sounds like a lot of work. In fact, it sounds like it's far more time-consuming than the usual method foundations use for assessing grant applications.

Göbel: Well, given what I hear about the sheer number of applications other foundations receive, I'm not sure that's true. What's more, by using our particular application process, we develop a relationship with the applicant, which is very useful if, ultimately, we go ahead and provide a grant to the applicant. In other words, we approach the process very differently from foundations where administrators approve a grant while sitting at their desks and only then start to get to know the people behind the application. Fur-

thermore, we have made a conscious decision not to use the standard method of financing projects used by most German foundations. Herr Schöpflin's foundation in California has been known, for example, to finance organisations over a period of ten or even fifteen years.

Schöpflin: This all goes back to my experience as a venture capitalist. If a project goes well, as a venture capitalist I don't then simply walk away from it – I invest more in it. The fact that most German foundations withdraw from projects after a maximum of three years seems to me a highly unsustainable way to operate.

Apart from the length of the funding periods, what are the key differences between the German and the US foundation landscapes?

Schöpflin: In the USA the starting point is very different from here in Germany. Many American foundations have been around for decades, they are part of the institutional landscape and have a truly progressive-liberal agenda. Part of the reason for this is no doubt the fact that these foundations have old, institutional money at their disposal and – for the most part – progressively-minded Executive Directors have the possibility to allocate this money in issues that are most relevant to civil society.

But in the USA we also see the other extreme – namely highly conservative foundations.

Schöpflin: That's true – things are far more polarised in the US. Here in Germany people are either closer to the middle ground, or they simply keep schtum.

Is that really the case? Recently here in Europe more and more right-leaning foundations have been set up – a phenomenon that we haven't seen before.

Schöpflin: Things have become more radicalised in recent years. But I believe a good democracy should be able to withstand these developments. There is fundamentally far greater willingness among US foundations for them to take a political position. I have the impression that German foundations like to hide their political views and are far less willing to show their political colours. I have my doubts that this is the right thing to do.

Why?

Schöpflin: Because, as a foundation, you have a certain responsibility. But foundations seem to have a complex set of anxieties – something we could talk about at length. Our foundation does not suffer from these anxieties. We are (politically) colour blind: with the exception of the Far Right, the political orientation of our grantees is of no consequence to us. What's important to us is what's at the heart of a project – in other words, we don't follow an alleged non-partisan line.

Göbel: Part of this issue is, of course, the ongoing debate about the very legitimacy of foundations. We would like to see more honesty here. Clearly different foundations have different interests; and, of course, all foundations try to exert influence; and, unlike our elected representatives, foundations are not made up of people who have been

elected. But similarly, the media – who are deemed to be the fourth estate of a democratic state – are not elected. It would certainly be helpful if this were properly reflected and objectives were transparent. That's the first thing. Then there's the issue that many foundations simply promote democracy via relevant studies....

Schöpflin: ... or via a one-size-fits-all report ...

Göbel: Well yes – that's perhaps overstating things a little. But nevertheless, we would like to see more foundations actually trying things out for themselves. Why not take a chance and run a real-life, social experiment? Take 'direct democracy' for example. You could read a whole pile of books on the subject – but why not just give it a go! It's much easier to talk about an issue if you've actually tried it out for yourself.

But I assume this approach also means that you will, from time to time, give grants to some projects and initiatives that then go on to fail?

Göbel: Perhaps you'd rather comment on failure, Herr Schöpflin!

Schöpflin: (*laughs*) With pleasure! As an entrepreneur I have always said to my employees that they are allowed to make mistakes. If we don't make mistakes, we're nothing more than a sort of insurance company – and we won't earn anything. And this approach applies equally to philanthropy. Of course, there's a certain risk here. But we can minimise the risk by giving advice and tackling problems at a very early stage. If we decide to provide a grant to an organisation, we don't then just sit back and wait for six months or a year for the organisation to provide us with a written report about how things are going. Our programme staff visit each grantee at least once every six to eight weeks: they go out to the grantees and talk to them, face-to-face. In other words, we are very closely involved with the projects we help to fund. That way, we are better placed to identify and solve some of the problems that might arise.

But doesn't the power issue rear its head again here? If you – as grant providers - are so closely involved with the grantees, how do you ensure that they don't feel as if they have no say over their affairs?

Schöpflin: Good question. One for your, Herr Göbel! (*Laughs*).

Göbel: In essence I think it's all about the way in which you do it. It starts with small things – who defines the objectives, for example. Should they be set by the foundation, or by the grantee? And what's the best way to communicate the expectations we have? These things all need to be done with great sensitivity.

One of the organisations your foundation supports is the *Zentrum für politische Schönheit* (Centre for Political Beauty), an organisation whose often sensational activities are regularly the subject of much controversy. A recent example of their activities was the building of replicas of some of the stelae from the German Holocaust Memorial in Berlin in front of the home of the AfD politician, Björn Höcke. If you are so closely involved in your grantees' work, do you get told in advance about this sort of activity?

Göbel: No – these activities take us as much by surprise as they do you. And the *Zentrum für politische Schönheit* is precisely the sort of organisation that would completely reject any sort of interference from us – not least given that they see themselves as artists. The point is, were there to be the slightest hint that we might be trying to tell our grantees what to do, both their and our credibility would be seriously damaged.

Let's talk about the concept of non-profit journalism, to which your foundation has dedicated an entire work programme. What is non-profit journalism?

Göbel: We're currently carrying out a study in order to get to the bottom of what non-profit journalism is really about. The study is re-analysing this type of journalism, defining the concept, its terms and definitions, and mapping out its contours. Basically, what we mean here is that, in addition to the two well-known pillars of journalism – namely the public broadcasters and the private-sector publishers - there is what you might call a third pillar (or pillarlet at least), namely non-profit journalism. The players involved here work on a not-for-profit basis, in other words they are neither publicly funded nor profit oriented.

And it's this pillarlet that you want to strengthen?

Göbel: Yes – both structurally and content-wise too. In terms of structure, I'm thinking about member-financed or foundation-financed journalism and hybrids of that sort.

And content-wise?

Göbel: Here our aim is to resurrect certain niche forms of journalism.

Which niches are you thinking about?

Göbel: Primarily I'm thinking about investigative and constructive journalism, and also about cross-border journalism projects – somewhat akin to the Panama Papers story. Of course, these three types of journalism do already exist in some form in the other two journalism pillars, but in order for them to emerge from their current niches, we believe there's a need for new energy and more players.

What you perceive as the strengthening of journalism, the current main players in quality journalism might see as competition – and not unjustifiably so. Rather than creating a whole new domain of journalism, wouldn't it be simpler and fairer just to support the existing quality media – not least given that the ground on which their business model stands is becoming increasingly shaky as a result of digitalisation?

Göbel: I think there's room for both – and this is indeed happening, in the form of research bursaries for example which can be awarded to a *Spiegel* reporter or to a journalist from the *Süddeutsche* newspaper. And these bursaries also help the publishers of

course. And many of our journalist grantees – be they from *Correctiv* or *Investigate Europe* or *Riffreporter* – have cooperation agreements with the classic journalism outlets and publish their work in the traditional media.

You don't just give grants to non-profit investigative agencies; you are currently having an entire centre – the non-profit journalism house - built in the Neukölln district of Berlin on the site of a former cemetery. What is that project all about?

Göbel: The basic concept for the House came from the founder of *Correctiv*, David Schraven. He realised that there are far too few places where investigative journalists can come together and exchange ideas. And then added to that, many of our Berlin-based grantees were telling us that they constantly have to move because of ever-rising rents. So, at some point we came up with the idea that one of the types of financial support that our foundation could provide could take the form of collective funding – in other words, we could create a piece of infrastructure where colleagues can collaborate.

Schöpflin: Yes, we don't see this as a way of creating a new medium; it's a centre for collaboration. The different media and publications that base themselves at the House will continue to work independently on their own projects. But perhaps at some point one or two of them will decide to work collaboratively on different projects.

And will the stories that emerge from these collaborative projects appear in the main-stream media?

Schöpflin: A great many things are going to change there – not least as a result of developments in digitalisation. Who knows how things will be in three or five years' time. What we are clear about is that we want to get a technology infrastructure project up and running; and it will be available both to tenant organisations in the building as well as to outside groups that perhaps need somewhere where they can shoot a film for example. We see the House more as a platform.

When will it open its doors?

Göbel: We can't name a date at the moment because that would get us into hot water – not least in Berlin. What we can say is that we are currently in the midst of the development process, both in terms of concept and content and in terms of the architectural design.

Schöpflin: If we manage to open the House at the end of 2022 / beginning of 2023, we will have done well.

So, from visions for the future back to the Foundation's work today. Herr Göbel, you have been the Foundation's Managing Director for three years now. How do you divide up the tasks between yourself and Herr Schöpflin?

Schöpflin: Good question – and something I've always wanted to know too (*laughs*).

Göbel: Well, on the one hand we have divided up the relatively classic tasks in the usual way. I run the Foundation from an operational point of view and am responsible for the teams. But we work together on the Foundation's strategy – and that's an ongoing and intensive discussion.

And what happens if you disagree on a particular issue?

Schöpflin: Then we thrash it out. From memory, I've never once said: "Right, Herr Göbel, I'm not interested in what you think – just do as I say."

Göbel: No, that's never happened. What we do is try to convince the other person using reasoned arguments. And the same applies to other colleagues too. In the end, it's the best argument that wins the day – not the colleague who is higher up the hierarchy.

Schöpflin: Let me give you an example. Recently one of our programme directors presented us with a new project. It was a good project, but once I got to know the people behind it, I had a bad feeling about it all. So, we talked it all through and, in the end, decided not to provide any funding. My point is, in the end it's all about the people involved. You can have the best idea ever, but if the people tasked to put it into effect don't fit, one-hundred percent, then the best idea counts for nothing. I'd rather we went with the second-best idea but an excellent team, than the other way around. And I speak from thirty years' experience.

Interview by Nicole Alexander and Dr Mario Schulz