

# DIALOGUE AND REPRESENTATION: COMMUNICATION IN THE ELECTRONIC PUBLIC SPHERE

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## Abstract

The Internet in many ways changed our established conceptions not only about space, time, and access, but also about publicness, activity and interaction. The interplay of these changes is clearly expressed in the idea of electronic public sphere, which itself depends heavily on the working of the dominant forms of communication. But it should be posed as a question rather than simply assumed whether new possibilities for participatory opinion formation come from interactive qualities of the Internet alone. As argued in this paper, cyberspace is constituted not only by interactive communication, but also by the forms of representation that are more similar to the elements of so-called mediated publicness, which originate from the process of normalisation of cyberspace. By approaching these issues through the conceptual framework of dialogue and representation, it is possible to reduce the complexity of cyberspace and thus to engage in a systematic analysis of the existing realms of public and political action.

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## Introduction

With the emergence of Internet there evolved a question whether the new form of communication – computer-mediated communication – would contribute to a higher degree of social integration. How could it connect and reintegrate individuals? How could it enrich the interaction between citizen, social groupings and their governments? Crucial dilemmas within this broad and diverse circle of debates were focused on the emergence of the “electronic,” “cyber” or “virtual” public sphere (Connery 1997; Poster 1997; Knapp 1997; Fernback 1998). The prospects of its emergence were stimulated by a rapid implementation of communication technologies into everyday life, and especially into the realm of politics. This also gave rise to new ideas about how to explain, describe and understand the emerging public life. The rich spectrum of these ideas could be broadly divided into two parts: on the one side there are arguments that the new electronic public sphere is merely a supplement to the conventional public sphere (Buchstein 1997; Hague and Loader 1999; Wilhelm 2000), while on the other hand it was argued that this was a radically new and different version of the public sphere (Poster 1997; Knapp 1997).

It is not our intention here to evaluate these two broadly defined fields of contemporary research. These recent debates on the electronic public sphere are taken as a starting point by means of which it is possible to explore more closely: (1) whether the conditions of public sphere are met in cyberspace empirically, and (2) in what way the notion of public sphere could be defined theoretically. Relative to these concerns, this paper deals with the question about the role of dominant communication forms in its formation. Theoretical perspective with which it is analysed is framed in terms of the structure and dynamics of existing communicative activities of individuals, institutions, or groups in cyberspace.

The broader context in which these activities are located and made relevant for the discourse on the electronic public sphere is explained with the “normalisation of cyberspace” thesis (Resnick 1998). Due to the process of normalisation the nature of cyberspace is different from that which was found in its earliest stages precisely with respect to existing communication processes. By accepting the normalisation of cyberspace thesis, it is possible to observe how the earlier prevalence of unmediated, interactive, synchronous dialogue is being largely supplemented with a variety of popular Web representations. As a consequence, the coexistence of diverse communication patterns changed the conditions in which the electronic public sphere is formed.

It seems, however, that contemporary interpretations of the electronic public sphere tend to overlook this effective structural change in the dominant forms of communication. The popular enthusiasm of computer-mediated dialogical exchanges, debates or discussions is still found at the core of various analyses of the “transformed” public sphere (Connery 1997; Davis 1999; Dahlberg 2001; Wilhelm 2000). No doubt, the rapid extension of communication technologies into different aspects of public life was mainly stimulated by its potential for interactive, unmediated and synchronous communication, which was previously unthinkable. The Internet itself would probably receive much less attention in the first place if it did not have the potential for the management of information, for instance storage, retrieval and dissemination. But the recent prevalence of Web representations, which are becoming the common form of self-presentation in cyberspace, suggests

that the electronic public sphere is becoming increasingly similar to the notion of “mediated public sphere” (Thompson 1995). This particular research problem thus relates to the dilemma whether our notion of public sphere should be reshaped with the introduction of new communication technologies. The theoretical question of our concern is whether the Internet should no longer be seen merely as a decentralised, uncontrolled network of computers, but is as an increasingly complex medium, where the dialogic potentials merge with Web representations.

The role of representations in the complex processes of formation of the public sphere has been widely recognised long before the popularity of the Internet. Peters (1997) for instance proposes that it is no longer viable to insist on traditional means of communication, such as dialogue or reasoned debate. In his opinion, social representations, transmitted through media, contain integrating elements: framed as images and symbols they connect dispersed places. There are many parallels between the elements of our contemporary lives which have been shaped by the new communication technologies and those that have been redefined as a result of the profusion of mass media, especially of television.

The significance of dialogue or mediated representations within the public sphere has been widely changed throughout history, especially in relation to the development of mass media. The attention in this article is therefore given to the examination of key assumptions and characteristics of the so called “mediated public sphere,” which evolved as a result of mass communication. The concept of the “mediated public sphere,” which was given currency in the 1990s (Dahlgren 1991; Zolo 1991; Thompson 1995; Schulz 1997) implied both that media substantially expanded the potentials of the visible and the range of those who may be reached by what is made visible. However, the reliance on this theoretical framework should not be interpreted as an attempt to compare the classical notion of public sphere with its mediated form. Our aim is rather to examine those aspects of mediated public sphere, which should be revised or transformed due to the recent profusion of computer-mediated communication. As Slevin (2000, 76) argues, the role of new communication technologies in transforming the public sphere becomes a task of central importance when it is taken into account that all forms of mediated communication, including the Internet, contribute to a sphere in which knowledge is shared and opinion is formed. The question, however, is to what extent different theories of “mediated public sphere” consider the elements which are being introduced with new communication technologies.

The first part of the article attempts to address the main characteristics of the “mediated public sphere.” The next section turns to the classification of the recent arguments about why new communication technologies need to be studied in relation to the notion of the public sphere. In the last section the conceptual answers, with which to understand the emerging on-line environment and its relation to the notion of public sphere, are sought on the basis of a thesis on the normalisation of cyberspace.

## Dependence of Public Sphere on the Dominant Forms of Communication

The notion of public sphere necessarily relies on the existing communication processes and it may be said that it depends heavily on the working of the domi-

nant forms of communication. This point has been much debated ever since Habermas' study on the structural transformations of the public sphere (1989), which tied the notion of public sphere, its constitution, structure and change closely to rational debate. Habermas defined the public sphere as a domain of social life in which public opinion can be formed and based on this understanding of, as Garnham (1992, 361) says, "the transposition of the model of face-to-face communication to that of mediated communication." Public sphere which was in principle open to all citizens was, according to Habermas, constituted in every conversation in which private persons came together to form a public. The Web of face-to-face dialogue, in which individual claims are measured by the criteria of rational argumentation, set up a complex and vivid framework of thoughts in which public life developed. Consequently, the lack of interpersonal exchange and dialogue is seen as contributing to the demise of the public sphere and its "refeudalisation" (Habermas 1989).

As this last point indicates, the critical role in formation and maintenance of public sphere within the context of modern societies was attributed to the mass media, especially to the television. As Splichal notes (1999, 273) mass media became the precondition for the existence of public sphere because they act as the site where ideas and interests can be freely presented and discussed. However, "contemporary communication possibilities and the dominant forms of (mass) communication have stimulated the development of ideas about the postmodern public sphere, which, as opposed to the modern or enlightened public sphere, is not composed of a network of interdependent participatory communications channels. Instead, it is based upon representations in mass media" (Splichal 1999, 26-27).

The argument that mass media are key determinants of the transformed public sphere was convincingly elaborated by Dahlgren (1991), Thompson (1995), Zolo (1991), and others, and is eloquently reflected in the concept "mediated publicness."<sup>1</sup> Mass media were seen as generators of "social representations," of "spectacle," of the stage of public visibility. Mediated public sphere was in turn characterised as non-dialogical, open-ended and non-localised. Schulz similarly elaborated the model of a "media-constructed public sphere" (2001, 342) in which the spontaneous presence of "media publics" emphasises the fragmentation of public sphere and even the appearance of "esoteric circles" (Schulz 1997, 62). However, the effects of such transformation are not uniform, as is possible to conclude from substantial differences in theoretical perspectives.

In one of the most elaborate accounts of this transformation, John B. Thompson argues that prior to the development of mass media, the publicness of individuals or events was linked to the sharing of common locale; this "traditional publicness of co-presence" was constituted by the richness of symbolic cues characteristic of face-to-face interactions: "it was a publicness which involved sight as well as sound, visual appearance as well as the spoken word: the public event was a spectacle which could be seen, heard, perhaps even smelled or felt in some way" (Thompson 1995, 125). The second determining characteristic of publicness as co-presence is its essentially dialogical character. Indeed, it was expressed in various ways – whether by speaking or by displaying other kinds of spectator behaviour like booing, hissing, clapping, and so forth. The fundamental feature of these new forms is that the publicness of individuals, actions, or events is no longer linked to the shar-

ing of a common locale. An action or event can be made public by being recorded and transmitted to others who are not physically present at the time and place of its occurrence. The publicness of an action or event is thus independent of its capacity to be seen or heard directly by a plurality of co-present individuals (Thompson 1995, 126).

When Thompson invites us to ask whether it is possible to apply the traditional model of publicness as co-presence to the social and political conditions of the late 20th century, he aims precisely at the profusion of indirectness and mediation.<sup>2</sup> If initially mediated publicness, determined by the printed press, figured as some kind of appendage to existing forms of public life, its currently expanded appearance took over almost completely with the rise of electronic media. "As new media of communication became more pervasive, the new forms of publicness began to supplement, and gradually to extend, transform and displace, the traditional forms of publicness" (Thompson 1995, 126).

The idea of mediated publicness is related to the assessment of prevailing forms of social interaction in the public sphere, forms which are promoted by contemporary mass media. Thompson (1995, 84) argues that with the expansion of mass media, especially television, the dominant type of interaction became "mediated quasi-interaction." This type differs from more traditional face-to-face communication in that it is predominantly one-way, that it is aimed at an indefinite range of potential recipients, and in that it narrows the range of symbolic cues available during interaction. Although it still creates a certain kind of shared situation in which individuals are linked together, it is essentially unique, according to Thompson (1995, 81-85) in terms of "action orientation" and also in terms of its "monological character."

Thompson's theory of mediated publicness, which builds on the prevalence of mediated quasi-interaction, is constituted with three general characteristics (1995, 246-247):

- Mediated publicness is a *non-localised* space in the sense that it is not tied down to particular spatial-temporal locales. It is a 'space' in the sense that it is an opening sphere of possibilities in which mediated symbolic forms can appear, is extended in time and space, and is potentially global in space.
- Mediated publicness is *non-dialogical* in the sense that the producers and the recipients of mediated symbolic forms are generally not engaged in a dialogue with one another. The roles of producer and recipient are differentiated, and the relation between them is asymmetrical.
- Mediated publicness is an *open-ended space* in the sense that it is a creative and uncontrollable space, a space where new symbolic forms can be expressed, where new words and images can suddenly appear, where information previously hidden from the view of others can be made available, and where the consequences of becoming visible cannot be fully anticipated and controlled.

The shift introduced by the fact that the public sphere is exclusively formed under the influence of the mass media, which determine its nature, conditions and also its limitations, embraces many diverse implications. The older notion of public sphere is thus replaced by a new model, which is much *more dependent on representation and on novel forms of communication* (Zolo 1991; Peters 1997; Schulz 1997) and that receives much less impetus from more classical, dialogical forms of

communication. The dominant characteristic of the mediated public sphere is therefore its profusion and, possibly, also the overload of social representations, according to Zolo (1991). While Thompson presents loss of the localised space of human co-presence as the central consequence of these developments, Peters (1997) traces central effects of mediated publicness more thoroughly in changes of social communication. Peters writes that because of the diffusion of new communication channels, which are in a certain sense both public and accessible, once normative forms of communication, such as dialogue, argumented discussion, critically sought consensus and informed participation, gave way to different forms of communication.

Compared to the electronic mass media, especially television, which in Habermas' account brought about the refeudalisation of the public sphere, new communication technologies offer resources for its revitalisation. Two characteristics of communication processes are especially relevant in this context: *reciprocity* and *connectedness*. These are clearly present in computer-mediated communication, whereas they were mostly absent in the context of mass communication. As argued by Slevin, mediated publicness created by the Internet is clearly "a dialogical space" (Slevin 2000, 184), where symbolic forms circulate from various participants as authors of individual messages. According to Slevin, "unlike the mass media, the Internet cannot so easily be dismissed as being non-dialogical," because the interactive qualities of Internet create new possibilities for participatory opinion formation (2000, 78). Moreover, the Internet brings together and combines many phases of the communication process, for instance storage, exchange and interaction, reproduction, and changing communication channels, to an extent which thus far has no comparison. Internet is a register of information and a means for communication, and is specific also for its capacity to connect various agents effectively, quickly and reciprocally.

By means of dialogue between individual citizens, the Internet has produced another form of political communication, which offers a new form of "virtual association" (Davis 1999, 149). The interactive nature of computer-mediated communication enables the creation of new discussion fora, where individuals can exchange their opinions and listen to others' views. Through such novelties, specialised groups of interests are formed, propagating their own preferences and aims, inviting new supporters or potential members. With the emergence of new "dialogical spaces" the nature of public space has widened and the dynamic of public activities has grown. This new public platform became an alternative place where opinions are expressed and as such it represents a new challenge for the rethinking on the public sphere.

## Contemporary Motives for Rethinking of the Public Sphere

Cyberspace, which by definition consists of intense communication processes, came to be understood as a locus of the new "electronic public sphere" and, in the opinion of most contemporary researchers (Aikens 1999; Connery 1997; Hague and Loader 1999; Malina 1999; Slevin 2000; Wilhelm 2000), furnishes new means and potentials for revitalising an active and attentive public. Electronic public sphere is in this sense inseparable from the concept of cyberspace which consists of numerous rooms and places – chat rooms, electronic conferences, newsgroups, vir-



tual coffee shops, Web crossings, or in general computer-mediated discussion fora. From a more technological point of view, this very distinct body of studies is focused on the uses of these new communication technologies, because they closely relate to the historical forms of communication which once structured public sphere. Computer-mediated discussion fora are even directly compared to the institutions and events such as the ancient Greek agora, salons and coffee-houses of the European Enlightenment, which throughout history defined public spheres (Connery 1997; Knapp 1997). Fernback (1998) for instance understands Internet relay chat (IRC) and Usenet conferences as parallels to the British coffee-houses and French salons from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This in a sense reflects an underlying understanding of communication technologies as primarily new and different communication channels from which changes and transformations of the public sphere also emerge. But in comparison to the emergence of mass media communication and transformation of the “classical public sphere” into the “mediated public sphere,” the expanding cyberspace integrates various new communication practices that are more promising for revitalisation of the public sphere.

Contemporary scholarly discourse offers various arguments about why social implications of new communication technologies need to be studied in relation to the notion of the public sphere (see Buchstein 1997; Connery 1997; Dahlberg 2001; Ess 1994; Knapp 1997; Poster 1997; Tsagarousianou 1998; Schmidtke 1998). Broadly speaking, they can be divided into three groups.

### Overflow of New Technological Potentials

The first group of motives arises from the acknowledgement of specific technological innovations which are implemented in new communication technologies and deserve special attention in relation to the development of the new public sphere. The reasons for theorising a new and revitalised public sphere are primarily seen in technological advances and in technical features such as user-friendly and universal access, interactivity and connectedness. Buchstein mentions that the application of normative democratic theory to new communication technologies is possible precisely because technologies themselves enable fulfilment of its diverse expectations, such as “universal access, uncoerced communication, freedom of expression, unrestricted agenda, and participation outside of traditional political institutions” (Buchstein 1997, 251). It is perceived as a means for opening and expanding spaces for public and political action. Furthermore, the Internet, as a widespread and popular network of computers, is often perceived as enabling “the most ideal speech situation” (see Ess 1994), which is consistent with the idea of a universal, non-hierarchical, and rich public sphere.

### Redefinition of Space

The second group of studies starts from a common assumption about the *new emerging space*, namely that computer-mediated communication creates a new kind of space – cyberspace. The “electronic public sphere” thus relates strictly to the spatial dimension. Both scholarly and popular discussions about the networks of integrated communication technologies immediately realised resources for rethinking and reinterpreting our comprehension of space. Poster (1997) argues that “to frame the issue of the political nature of the Internet in relation to the concept of the public sphere is particularly appropriate because of the spatial metaphor as-

sociated with the term" (Poster 1997, 206). Recent studies frequently point out the asymmetrical relation between electronically constituted and physical space, and the increased potentialities for interactive communication and exchange between individual participants (Chesher 1997; Healy 1997). There is one clear common implication in such emphases of the space dimension relative to the notion of the public sphere, namely that the latter suggests an arena for exchange rather than some institutional structure. This in turn is connected to the issue of the restructured relation between the technology used and communication processes between included social agents.

### Success of Practical Implementations

The third framework of studies draws from recently expanded empirical projects, where communication technologies are implemented in democratic processes in order to extend the existing public sphere. This group of claims, which emphasise the importance of analysing the changing public sphere, emerges from the existing experimental extensions and applications of the new communication technologies to established political procedures and actions. It has been claimed that in order to assess the democratising potential of electronic democracy projects, we have to assess to what extent the public sphere has been widened and opened up (Tsagarousianou 1998, 52). In other words, the success of electronic democracy projects depends on their capacity to support and enable the introduction of new forms of "publicness" within the existing public sphere, which is dominated by privately owned and controlled media and the state (Tsagarousianou 1998, 52).

It is not surprising that researchers of the relation between the uses and potentials of communication technologies and changes in the public sphere approach the issue from several theoretical frameworks. They have different perceptions and understanding of the causes and determinants and draw different, even contrasting conclusions about them. However, one common reference point of studies on "electronic public sphere" is their linkage to the Habermasian notion of public sphere and their explicit theoretical debate with its assumptions (Buchstein 1997; Connery 1997; Fernback 1997; Knapp 1997; Poster 1997; Tsagarousianou 1998; Schneider 1998; Wilhelm 2000). The central question that these studies raise is to what extent computer generated spaces "resemble" the conditions and contexts of the discursively formed public sphere, which Habermas emphasised, in which individuals participated as private citizens in a public use of their reason. Parallels with Habermasian notion of the discursive public sphere are broadly outlined, but the public sphere itself is understood as an intermediate social space, which on the one hand constantly relates to the institutions and agents of the government, and on the other maintains a relation to the economy, capital and corporations (Wilhelm 2000; Tsagarousianou 1998). In most cases, research agendas include analyses of specific sites which are continuously re-emerging and reshaping within thus understood intermediate space, as for instance discussion fora or other sites of social communication and association.

However, these attempts to apply the Habermasian notion of public sphere in electronically mediated cyberspace also meet with empirical obstacles and conceptual problems (Buchstein 1997; Streck 1998; Wilhelm 2000; Schneider 1998; Dahlberg 2001). At least three assumptions are rarely satisfied in the present context of the cyberspace (Buchstein 1997). Firstly, the idea about universal and easy access to



the public sphere, which would allow every institution the means of transferring information and every citizen the possibility of finding them directly and without gate-keeping. In this sense, the Internet as the first global medium for direct, effective and quick interaction of many with many, was supposed to reshape the notion of citizenship (Malina 1999). The second problematic assumption is the thesis about invulnerability to authoritarianism, which claims that no authority can control the Internet as an essentially decentralised network of computers, a means for the establishment of democratic virtual communities and a medium for fulfilment of fundamental human rights and for the spread of democratic values. Third, the assumption about the critical public sphere in the sense that communication on-line challenges existing power structures by offering citizens independence from government offices and big corporations (Buchstein 1997, 250-251).

## Normalisation of Cyberspace

I propose to explain more realistically the emerging on-line environment and its relation to the notion of public sphere with the conceptual framework offered by the normalisation of cyberspace thesis, although in its initial presentation it was not directly linked with theoretical concerns of the transforming and changed "electronic public sphere" (Resnick 1998). However, the thesis directly explains basic changes in the prevailing forms of communication in cyberspace and thus explains changes in conditions which are necessary for the formation of the public sphere. It argues that the fluid and unstructured politics of newsgroups and listserves has been largely replaced by the organised politics of the Web, structured by formal presentations which are the product of thought and deliberation, and open to all participants (Resnick 1998, 49). Cyberspace has developed from a simple text-based communication medium with limited access into a multimedia phenomenon with a mass audience. The Internet thus "lost its political innocence" (Resnick 1998, 49).

The normalisation process can be presented as a process of change which can be divided into two stages. In the first stage, the Internet figured as "a virtual state of nature"; in the second, the Internet figures as "a virtual pluralistic society." According to Resnick, the first period slightly resembles Locke's idea about the state of nature and reflects a period when life on-line was simple, fun and not particularly profitable. Cyberspace figured as something without limits and accessible to anyone; every individual could be both producer and consumer; communities which occupied this space were connected by their joint interests; differences of opinion were welcomed and valued, because they stimulated discussion. Other works also testify to this "free territory" of the Internet as well (see Rheingold 1993; Holmes 1997 and others). Just as with Locke, who saw the cause of the demise of the state of nature in the invention of money, cyberspace gradually lost its political innocence and now figures more as a pluralistic civil society. Cyberspace "has its own economy, complete with overly optimistic business forecasts; it has developed a complicated division of labour with its attendant inequalities; and it has heard the call for laws and regulation and the protection of private property" (Resnick 1998, 51). There emerged new institutions and with them new agents, new organisations; novel policies and practices also appeared, because it became increasingly attractive for economic, social and political powers, which had previously ignored it.

The main leverage which determined and accompanied this change from the “state of nature” to the time of “innocence lost,” was a specific technical innovation – the introduction and rapid spread of the World Wide Web (WWW). With its graphical sophistication and its hypertext site focus, the WWW not only introduced new services but also changed the uses of cyberspace. Its effects *transformed the nature of the communicative action* which had been characteristic for cyberspace. Communication on-line took on a new meaning. The Internet was no longer predominantly a text-based network system “centred around dialogic communication and postings, an anarchic melange of newsgroups and listserves and gopher sites” (Resnick 1998, 52). It was transformed from unstructured, text-based interactive practices into organised, monological homepage presentations.

Such implications open up additional questions regarding the nature and conditions of the new electronic public sphere. In the following sections, I will present some dilemmas in relation to the previous debate on the mediated public sphere.

### The Profusion of Web Representations

The Internet, as the presently most popular network of computer networks, offers a rich and complex communication environment, and it is still rapidly developing. Accordingly, the electronic public sphere, however defined, is necessarily found in a state of ambiguity and constant flux. But the question is, does this process of change lead to the return of “mediated publicness,” as outlined by Thompson? According to Slevin’s (2000) analysis, the answer to this question is decidedly negative, because of the nature and characteristics of the Internet, although “the mechanisms by which the Internet and intranets facilitate public spheres continue to have a great deal in common with the mechanisms deployed in non-dialogical mediated publicness as set out by Thompson” (Slevin 2000, 185). What is absent from Thompson’s model of the public sphere, which resulted from his analyses of the conditions and circumstances of the electronic mass media, are precisely the dialogic potentials of cyberspace. So the question is, to what extent does his idea about publicness as the space of visibility apply to the context of public life in the cyberspace, and where can we expect differences to appear?

One fundamental defining feature of Thompson’s mediated publicness, which makes comparison with a computer network such as the Internet possible, is the idea that it is not associated with any specific physical space, or in Thompson’s words that it requires a “non-localised space.” The new computer-mediated spheres which offer possibilities for mediating information and making it available could also easily be viewed in this light because individual users do not have to share a common locale (Slevin 2000, 183). The second dimension of mediated publicness, which further intensifies in the case of the Internet, is its open-ended character. Mediated publicness as an open-ended space signifies that it is a creative and relatively uncontrollable space in which previously absent information may be made available and where the content of symbolic forms cannot be entirely fixed in advance (Slevin 2000, 184). There is then the third feature of Thompson’s mediated publicness, which, however, is problematic with respect to the emerging forms of the electronic public sphere, namely its dependence on an essentially “non-dialogical space.” Because the mediated public sphere is in Thompson’s case exclusively constituted by radio, television and the press, participants who enter it actually engage in forms of mediated quasi-interaction. The resulting public space in-

creasingly becomes non-dialogical. As acknowledged by Slevin, the case of the Internet is in clear disparity with this third defining feature of mediated publicness.

Thus the question about the characteristics and nature of the electronic public sphere is precisely in the new potentials for dialogical communication; but as pointed out in the previous section it does not end here. Although participants do not share a common space, the Internet clearly creates 'dialogical spaces' where participants can come together to discuss issues of common concern. Compared to the broadcast media which transferred immediate dialogic exchanges to the narrow format of staged confrontations or broadcast conventions, the Internet leaves a much wider range of possibilities for the carrying out of debates on public issues.

Recently however, the earlier predominance of conversational forms of communication, characteristic of newsgroups, mailing lists, bulletin boards and other electronic conferences was supplemented by the paradigm of representations which are embodied in the hypertext system of Web pages. The website is now the typical element of contemporary cyberspace, although its function is not to replace the status of computer-mediated discussion fora. Web representations function primarily as new sites for information dissemination. The basic structure of representations is in general very different than is the logic behind the more dialogical spaces. Newsgroups are by nature interactive and can be viewed as conversations transplanted to a new medium, not as a finished product, but as an ongoing process: "Whether it is conducted on the net in real time or asynchronously, it still feels alive and spontaneous. Those who lurk, logging onto newsgroups without actually posting anything, are like those who stand around and listen to a conversation at a party, able to add to the conversation if they wish or move to another conversation" (Resnick 1998, 53).

Every individual is capable of contributing something to such conversations; engaging in them requires no special training, which clearly resembles the existing interactive situations which we form during the courses of our everyday lives. The opposite holds true for Web presentations, because creating and maintaining a successful sophisticated Web site which attracts a significant number of visits by other Internet users requires both substantial dedication and distinctive technical skills.

### Convergence of Web Representations and Computer-Mediated Dialogue

The present uses of Internet are characterised by an important shift from textually unstructured towards more organised politics of Internet. Computer-mediated communication is importantly complemented with computer-mediated representation. The transforming public sphere of cyberspace is thus a result of combination between the two. The "shift" from computer-mediated conversations, which constituted cyberspace in its early phases, to the Web representations also has broader implications. With the websites the new forms of politics emerged on the Internet. Because the design of websites implies the presentation of coherent positions, and the ability to inform, influence and persuade those who log onto them, through Web presentations a new political experience is created, which is unlike the amorphous dialogue of newsgroups and listserves, Resnick argues. These forms of politics have been structured in a double sense: politics on the Web present a structured experience and reflect the organised structure of pluralistic political

life in the real world (1998, 49). Cyberspace is thus populated by everyday politics in all its existing complexity and vitality and thus, according to Resnick (1998, 54), led into an era of organised civil society and structured group pluralism with a still relatively passive citizenry.

So, if we take into account the consequences of the normalisation of cyberspace, which seems like its most important structural transformation recently, we can formulate the question as to whether we are not presently witnessing the reverse development, namely that with increasing spread and use of electronic representations, dialogic communicative behaviour is waning. We can draw additional parallels to the working and effects of the broadcast electronic media. Networks of interconnected computer technologies clearly invite more graphical, expressive and monological means of expression, such as Web pages. These open different ways of interaction and service. They probably create the nearest match to “mediated quasi-interaction.” The combining of sound, video and text also opens up opportunities for producing and receiving a wider range of symbolic cues (Slevin 2000, 80).

But in these accounts the problem with explaining characteristics of the public sphere remains, because such accounts fail to grasp its current developments appropriately. If one does not start from the fact that cyberspace is packed by both dialogic communication and representation, one will fail to explain fully the existing structures of electronic public spaces. For the purpose of our analysis, we made the distinction between the paradigm of dialogue on the one side and the paradigm of representation more explicit than it reveals in practice. Following the ideas on mediated publicness the two elements function as two different conceptual tools, but which may definitely coexist in empirical reality. The question about the electronic public sphere should thus be posed with regard to *which of these integrative communication practices are dominant and which are not*.

The Internet offers new opportunities for citizens to find text of political speeches, arguments about policy issues, and new sources of information. Or as Moog argues in this respect: “As more people take advantage of these new sources of less mediated political communication, citizens and political actors regain a certain amount of control over their access to one another” (Moog 2001, 369). The new electronic public sphere might seem therefore to offer the possibility of a more informed and more participatory public (Moog 2001, 365). This may emerge not only through the reflection on Web presentations, but also through the selective search for new information, through less mediated and therefore more direct channels of interaction and through the participation in specialised discussion groups. Or as Gauntlett says: “The fact that people who are concerned about an issue can create a website about it, and then find themselves in e-mail conversation with people who are interested, curious or opposed to their views, or who run related sites, does create a climate of greater public discussion” (2000, 17).

## Conclusion

The Internet in many ways changed our established conceptions not only about space, time, and access, but also about publicness, activity and interaction. It can also be said that it contributed to the way communication processes, especially interpersonal dialogue, are perceived and experienced. The potential of the Internet

for dialogical exchange and communication has long been recognised as an important social resource but, as argued in this paper, cyberspace is presently characterised by profusion of another interesting form of communication — Web representations. This shift is consistent with the increasing popularity of the Internet and the fact that Web representations are indicative of the presence of agents, institutions, groupings, corporations and individuals, who use these new means for expressing identities and displaying interests. Profusion of Web representations are thus primarily due to the increased emphasis on visibility and presence.

Like interpersonal dialogue, Web representations contribute to the formation of different palpable bonds in cyberspace, for example, between institutions and individuals, between engaged and more accidental participants, between the like-minded, and so on. The logic of Web representations is essentially to portray oneself (as a person, a group, or an institution) to other Internet users and in this sense they are primarily about presence. Web representations may indicate the presence of either private or institutional actors in cyberspace, as their essential function is to inform and to present that which is specific of those for whom they stand. Compared to the representations that are found in broadcast media, the aim of Web representations is quite similar in the sense that in their capacity of images and symbols they connect dispersed places. But the specificity of Web representations, which is also their advantage over representations in broadcast media, is that they enable both passive reception as well as interactive exchange over them. Internet representations of public images and issues to this extent enable common grounds for action that is not itself limited to the level of latent opinions. The range of messages and statements, data and information, documents and memos that originate in the existing social contexts of cyberspace emphasise the extraordinary attention to representations and thus form an important part of the present public life.

In trying to relate this diversity to the notion of electronic public sphere, it is especially relevant to address those Internet representations which “mirror” institutional actors, such as political parties, governmental offices, or associations from civil society, since the new ways of establishing direct reference and contact with them are essential to its formation. Interactions between and around innumerable political websites, if “political” is understood in the broadest sense of the term, may be said to have set up proper cultures of engagement and discussion (Gauntlett 2000). Browsing through Web representations enables much more creative and engaged interaction with the received contents compared to the reception of television or radio programs. It is precisely in these possibilities that the immense richness and great challenge for future research should be recognised.

By approaching these issues through the conceptual framework of dialogue and representation, it is possible to reduce the complexity of cyberspace and thus to engage in a systematic analysis of the existing realms of public and political action. Building on the idea of normalisation of cyberspace, the necessary assumption is that electronic public sphere heavily depends on the coexistence of both contrasting forms of communication. In this sense, the most promising line of research lies, I believe, in the combined analysis of representations in dialogue on the one hand and of dialogues about representations on the other hand.

## Notes:

1. Splichal distinguishes between four dimension of the term publicness (1994,10): (1) the specific character of the public, (2) the public as a specific realm of life, (3) the public as a social category, and (4) the notion of public opinion. In the present text the discussion will be mostly focused on the changes of public as a *specific realm of life*, which is expressed and understood as “*the public sphere*.” For a more detailed discussion between these different notions see Splichal (1999).
2. Thompson’s reaction to the discrepancy between the traditional model of publicness and new forms of the public not only abandons elements of the traditional, but in this sense also goes against the assumption that mediated communication in some sense extends traditional forms of direct, face-to-face communication. His theorisation is an explicit call to put aside the traditional model and its emphasis on dialogical communication in a shared locale, and consequently to “free our way of thinking about public life from the grip of the traditional approach” (1995, 245).

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