

# ASYLUM POLITICS, THE INTERNET, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF UK REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUPS ONLINE

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## Abstract

This paper constitutes an exploration of use of the Internet for political purposes. The theoretical background is that of a critical approach to the theory of the public sphere and deliberative democracy. The substantive focus is on the political debate on immigration and asylum in the United Kingdom, and the empirical analysis is concerned with 45 activist organisations supporting immigrants and asylum seekers. The paper asks the following questions: Who do these websites primarily address? What type of information do they provide and to whom? Through focusing on the issues of addressees and communicative formats, this paper draws tentative conclusions regarding some of the political uses of the Internet. The findings indicate a variety of online communicative formats, including expressive, strategic and instrumental communications, with notable absence of any deliberation or dialogue.

None of these conforms to the requirements for the functioning of the public sphere, but this paper argues that to discount them renders the theory oblivious to the political gains of the instrumental use of the Internet by activist groups. This, alongside the publicness of the Internet, suggests possible revisions to our understanding of the Internet's role in politics.

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## Introduction

The dilemmas facing asylum and immigration politics in the cluster of countries designated as “Western” are widely known. In the United Kingdom, asylum and immigration politics appears torn between international commitments to provide asylum, local public opinion deemed hostile to refugees/immigrants, and a mixed economic situation of, on one hand, extra labour demands, and on the other, reluctance to provide any extension of welfare benefits and citizen rights. This confused situation has given rise to very restrictive policies, which in turn appear to legitimise the so-called public scepticism towards refugees/asylum seekers/immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Yet the restrictive and largely negative climate surrounding the asylum issue in the UK, and its associated rhetoric and justifications, has not gone unchallenged. Several non-governmental organisations have been launched for the purposes of supporting refugees in their quest for resettlement. If it were possible to provide a summary of the position of these diverse groups on the politics of asylum, this would be a position of solidarity with people fleeing their land for fear of persecution and/or to escape the burdens of poverty. Such a position is also pragmatic, in the sense that it demands that responses to asylum and immigration be realistically tuned to the increased requirements for labour, to an aging population, and also to the nation’s international commitments. The centrality and importance of this debate makes it a particularly interesting case for discussing the ways in which democratic politics is conducted, and within this, the relevance and contribution of the Internet.

There is, thus, a double questioning running through this paper, centring on two issues, a specific one, “what is made of the Internet by refugee support activists” and a more general one, “how can such use be assessed in theoretical terms.” The impetus for such questioning stems from dissatisfaction with the way in which public sphere theory can and has been applied to the Internet/politics relationship, coupled with a concern for a general lack of empirical findings which could show the way in which the Internet is actually politically employed. In addressing these issues, the focus is placed on the debate of asylum/immigration, whose current prominence is beyond dispute, and, specifically on the Internet presence of UK-based or operating refugee support groups, whose websites constitute the empirical material analyzed here. In empirical terms, thus, the concern is to identify the range of uses to which the Internet is put, while in theoretical terms, the concern is to extend our understanding of the Internet’s relationship to politics.

In gauging theoretically the relationship of the Internet and politics, the point of entry is Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere. It is hard to underestimate the influence this theoretical model has had on communications theory and the way it has directed research into the mass media. The perspective adopted here is one that uses the theory of the public sphere and the associated political theoretical model of deliberative democracy as an initial orientation, but aspiring to move beyond it or to expand our understanding of it. Thus, the empirical findings are employed in discussing the theory of the public sphere/deliberative democracy and its application on the Internet/politics relationship.

The findings indicate that, in their communications, refugee support groups address three different publics: the general public; a specialist public, comprising all those with a professional interest in asylum; and, finally, a public of refugees/

asylum seekers. The range of publics addressed, the multitude of ways in which they are addressed, and the publicness of such communications, cast a shadow over the requirements of the public sphere/deliberative democracy for rational/critical deliberations among a critical public as the only appropriate means of conducting online politics, and foreground Internet use as a tool for political praxis rather than a neutral public sphere.

## Public Sphere Theory and Deliberative Democracy

Although Habermas has shifted his focus and emphasis in the 40 years since *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1989) he largely stands by his original analysis of the public sphere and the diagnosis of its problems. The historical narrative of the public sphere holds that the relative freedom and autonomy obtained through private ownership, alongside the setting of boundaries between the state and society, led the bourgeois public of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe to create a public sphere in the salons and coffee houses, where men met and debated on issues. In principle open to all, the bourgeois public sphere has been truly radical because within it, it was not the identity and status of the speaker which determined the outcome of a debate, but the best argument. In other words, status differentials were “bracketed out,” thereby foregrounding the rationality and persuasiveness of the discourse itself. This idealised public sphere demanded that reasoned argumentation be the character of its discourse. Central to the proper functioning of the public sphere is the principle of publicity, whereby affairs should be made public and submitted to the scrutiny of the public. The principle of publicity constitutes not only the operating principle of the public sphere, but it further defines its political function as “that of subjecting the affairs that it made public to the control of a critical public” (Habermas 1989,140). The two criteria for the functioning of the public sphere that emerge from the above therefore include critical publicity and a rational critical public.

In his later work, and specifically in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984; 1987), Habermas refined his critique of the public sphere by introducing a division in social life, comprising two domains: the system and the lifeworld, both having a private and a public dimension. The “system” refers to the domain of the state and power – the public aspect – and to that of the economy and money – the private aspect; the “lifeworld” consists of the family (private) and the public sphere (public). The problem of the public sphere is now reformulated as a colonisation of the lifeworld by system imperatives, meaning essentially money and power. The solution offered by Habermas moves through introducing yet another division, this time comprising types of purposive action: instrumental, strategic and communicative. Instrumental and strategic actions are both oriented towards success – this “defined as the appearance in the world of a desired state, which can, in a given situation, be causally produced through goal oriented action or omission” (Habermas 1984, 285). Instrumental action refers to the following of technical rules, associated with the task elements of our social roles. Strategic action involves the following of rules of rational choice, and geared towards “influencing the decisions of a rational opponent.” Contrarily, communicative action is oriented towards reaching understanding; actors “pursue their individual goals under the condition that they harmonise their plans of action on the basis of common situation

definitions" (p. 286). "Understanding" is defined as the process of reaching agreement over such "definitions of the situation." Evidently, it is communicative action that is associated with the public sphere and the fulfilment of its political functions. The criteria emerging here thus include the requirement that the communications encountered in the public sphere are of the communicative action type, and hence that they be oriented not towards success, but towards understanding. Anything less may contaminate the public sphere, and undermine its essential role in democratic politics.

The public sphere thus becomes not only the locus of public politics, but also the domain in which first and foremost certain conditions of communication ought to prevail. These conditions are, in turn, associated with the model of deliberative democracy. Habermas (1992, 446; 1996, 305), in his discussion of this model, refers to the work of Joshua Cohen (1989) and defines deliberative democracy in the following terms: "The notion of deliberative democracy is rooted in the intuitive ideal of a democratic association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning, among equal citizens." In other words, models of deliberative democracy centre on the public provision of reasons and justifications of actions. For such deliberations to take place and for the outcome to be understanding or agreement, participants should be impartial and prepared to change their initial positions or orientations.<sup>2</sup> Taking these into account, Habermas revised his definition of the public sphere, which now is taken to refer to "the concept denoting all those conditions of communication under which there can come into being a discursive formation of opinion and will on the part of a public composed of the citizens of a state" (Habermas 1992, 446). Another criterion emerging here is that participants in deliberations should be prepared to change and shift from their original positions; in this respect, beliefs, attitudes, interpretations of interest, or identities, should only serve as initial orientations for deliberations.

In his more recent *Facts and Norms* (1996), Habermas has both defended and formalised the role that the public sphere should play in a democratic society: provided that all the above conditions and criteria are met, the public sphere ought to act as the link connecting "the informal discursive sources of democracy with the formal decision making institutions" (Habermas 1996, 169). Through public reasoning and argumentation, or a functioning public sphere, a discursive formation of opinion will generate influence ("communicative power"), which, in turn, will be translated into law and policy, thereby furnishing them with the legitimacy necessary for a democratic state. Thus, the role of the public sphere and the conditions or forms of communication that ought to characterise it remain central for Habermas' conception of democratic politics.

## Mass Media, the Internet and the Public Sphere

The connections and links between the public sphere and the mass media are part of Habermas' original analysis, and are further reiterated in his later work, in which he argues that the media should remain autonomous from the encroachments of the economy, and that journalism ought to act as the judiciary in an impartial, fair and autonomous manner.<sup>3</sup> It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that media sociology has made extensive use of Habermas' model in understand-

ing the media and their role in democratic politics. Thus, Garnham (1992) has employed a political economy perspective to examine the media as the hosts of the public sphere, arguing that the links between the media and the market prevents their proper functioning as a public sphere. From a historically-oriented perspective, Curran (1991) has outlined three different models of the relationship of the media to politics and respective functions/roles for the public sphere: the liberal, Marxist/communist and radical democratic positions – arguing in favour of the latter, but cautioning that its potential will not be reached unless market influences are somehow curbed or controlled. Both Garnham and Curran adopt a political economy perspective, in essence agreeing with Habermas' original diagnosis of the malaise associated with the colonisation of the media by market forces. In this respect, Peter Dahlgren's (1995) work on television and the public sphere differs in its substantive focus, since one of its primary concerns is to reconcile Habermas' focus on rational critical argumentation with the narrative and identity-based communication encountered on television. For Dahlgren, television has become the *par excellence* medium of the public sphere, and this has resulted in the necessity to expand existing definitions of citizenship, as well as the distinctions between the cultural and the political, and the public/private.

While undoubtedly enriching our understanding of the relationship between the media and the public sphere, these perspectives have focused exclusively on the mass media. Although the Internet has been considered by some as a mass medium (e.g., Morris and Ogan 1996) the problem is that it is overall too diverse to fit under one pattern of communication, one type of relationship to the market, one type of use, reception and so forth. This problem is all too often encountered in assessments of the Internet and the public sphere relationship. Specifically, such assessments in the light of the theory of the public sphere should examine the extent to which the Internet has the potential to fulfil the above criteria, that is, critical publicity addressed to a critical public, communicative-action type of contents, and the willingness to shift one's position. This apparently easy task, however, is confounded by at least two issues: first, the attribution of a particular character, nature or essence to the Internet, leading to its reification and essentialisation. A second problem comes to the fore here, stemming from the difficulties of pinning down the "essence" of the Internet; this is the question of how are we to deal with all these instances where the criteria are not met. In other words it is plausible that we encounter both instances where the criteria are met and where they are violated. What conclusions could we then reach vis-à-vis the contribution of the Internet to democratic politics? These problems are indeed faced by Gimmler (2001) whose overall positive evaluation of the Internet's contribution to deliberative democracy appears to overlook its multiple characters and contradictory aspects, and to focus only on those instances where the criteria appear to be more or less met, such as the Minnesota E-Democracy project, and the Association for Progressive Communications, both of which offer several forums for deliberation, while overlooking all other types of Internet sites, such as shopping sites, sites existing primarily for advertisement and public relations, not to mention games and porn sites.

But such problems<sup>4</sup> should not undermine any effort to gauge the Internet's participation in democratic politics. The reconciliatory path followed here is one of

localisation. This is related to, and indeed draws upon the literature on the “domestication” of the media and the Internet in particular (e.g., Van Zoonen 2002). At the same time, however, the focus is not on what happens when people use the Internet at home, but rather on the “production” side of it, on its use as a public medium.<sup>5</sup> This logically and temporally precedes and circumscribes the contexts of reception/use. By focusing on a particular political debate, that of asylum politics, we can thus pose questions concerning not “the Internet,” but Internet use, and not politics in general, but a specific politics. By examining the Internet presence of a particular part of civil society, consisting of refugee support groups, it is possible to identify a range of Internet uses, as opposed to any vague notion of the Internet<sup>6</sup> in general. Moreover, by looking at a concrete political debate, and a given part of civil society in its online instantiations it is further possible to return to the theoretical accounts enriched by empirical observations concerning the online conduct of (asylum) politics.

## Empirical Analysis: Using the Internet

### Issues of Method and Analysis

The empirical material consists of 45 websites, representing British refugee support groups. They were collected through an Internet search engine (Yahoo UK), through following links between these groups, and through Asylum Support Information, an online facility providing a wide range of resources on asylum. The websites studied here represent not-for-profit non-governmental organisations, with no party-political, academic or commercial affiliations. The groups ranged from the Westminster Diocese, to the Institute for Race Relations, to the Ethiopian Community in Lambeth (see appendix), and through this “snowballing” sampling technique, it was ensured that most, if not all, refugee support groups with an online presence were included. It should be noted that the websites collected represent a diverse and heterogeneous range of groups, which are nevertheless united in their defence and support of refugees. The different political positions of the various groups do not present a problem for the analysis insofar as this is concerned with the different communicative formats encountered in the websites, rather than with the substantive content of their communications.

Given that the empirical aim here is to identify actual Internet use, coupled with the current theoretical preoccupation with public sphere theory, the analysis considered all websites as a single “text” on asylum politics, and proceeded through focusing on the issue of the public(s) addressed in these websites and the communicative forms employed. The main way in which the websites were interrogated was, thus, through posing the following dual question: who is addressed and how? The responses provided the means by which to discuss both the addressees and the forms of the communications of the online refugee support groups, thereby enabling an understanding of the way in which these groups use the Internet.

In more methodological terms, and given the number of websites involved, this paper initially focused on the home pages of the groups, where these were available, and on the main introductory pages on asylum, where the homepages of the groups concerned did not directly deal with asylum (as, for instance, in the case of Oxfam). The various addressees were identified, or rather reconstructed, using the links as a unit of analysis. The threshold for inclusion into a category of



addressee was presence: in other words, all types of addressees were included, irrespective of the frequency by which they were addressed, or the diffusion of the same category across websites. This inclusive analysis aimed at preserving the complexity and heterogeneity of the groups under study. All addressees were subsequently classified under a category that described them best: three such categories were found, the general public, the public of specialists, and the refugee public. The links encountered in all the websites, both external and internal, were subsequently used as a means by which to validate the categories of addressee reconstructed here; thus, all the links were accounted for in that they could be fitted under at least one of these categories. It should also be made clear that a link could fit under more than one of the categories encountered, or, in other words, it could be addressed to more than one category of addressee. This shows that the categories are not mutually exclusive; at the same time, they cannot be reduced to each other, since there were instances of links that only address one public.

### Addressing the General Public

This is the most widely diffused category of addressee. Most, if not all, homepages of the refugee groups address a general public, including both those who purposely visit the site out of some interest, and the “onlookers,” those who may have come to it by happenstance. This public is addressed in the following ways: first, through descriptions of what the group aims at, its mission statement; second, through more general references to, information on, and news about, asylum/immigration; third, through exhibiting/publishing refugee stories, poems, images, drawings, and other forms of artistic expression; and finally, through offering invitations to participate in events, campaigns, or petitions organised by the group, or to donate time and/or money to the group.

Websites often start with a mission statement, which describes their aims, purposes and general *raison d'être*. When this information is not directly accessible on the homepage, a link to it was provided, often under headings such as “about us” or “who we are.” Sometimes a website includes both an introductory statement of what it is about, and more detailed information in an “about us” type of link. The following constitutes a typical introduction/mission statement:

“Refugee Action is an independent charity that supports refugees and asylum seekers to build new lives in the UK. We campaign to ensure that refugees’ voices are heard in matters that affect them, and that their needs are met.” ([www.refugee-action.org/ra\\_introduction.htm](http://www.refugee-action.org/ra_introduction.htm))

This general way of addressing the public appears to be an important part of the websites. Concerned with explaining what they seek to do, websites in this general address attempt to draw people in, to describe what they are doing and why, thus setting the pace for requesting the public’s active response.

This introductory address is complemented by more detailed material, including information on the issues of asylum/immigration and other resources of interest. Only rarely is such detailed information offered on a homepage; more often it is offered as a link to be followed from the homepage, under diverse headings, but still clearly recognisable as information on asylum/immigration. This information takes a variety of forms; for instance, Asylum Aid provides a link “about asylum,” where it cites the UN definition of a refugee; describes with “facts and figures” the

refugee situation in the UK; provides details on the current asylum law and policy; and finally, gives information concerning women refugees. The Refugee Council provides a link to an "info centre," which contains answers to "frequently asked questions," such as "why do asylum seekers use smugglers to reach the UK." A central concern here is to dispel some common assumptions or "myths" about asylum seekers/refugees, particularly as found in the mass media; thus, the Refugee Council provides a "myth buster" link, and Oxfam a link to a site containing "myths and realities." At the same time, an important part of many of the websites is concerned with current information or news. The larger groups, such as the Scottish Refugee Council, more typically undertake regular updates while other groups may provide external links to relevant news stories, such as the Cambridgeshire Against Refugee Detention group, which offers a link to the BBC coverage of relevant stories. This emphasis here on news, information, and "facts and figures" contrasts with the somewhat more emotive "mission statement" address encountered earlier.

As part of a general introduction to asylum/immigration issues, some websites also provide a platform for the voices of asylum seekers/refugees to be communicated to the general public. Often, this takes the form of stories, images, songs and poems, that is, of artistic expression. The Scottish Asylum Seekers Consortium has an online exhibition of "asylum images," which it also offers as screensavers. The North of England Refugee Service provides a link to "stories, songs and poems," in which refugees recount their experiences and communicate those to the "general public." Although such artistic expression may also result in a donation or membership, it also has another purpose: that of promoting an understanding of the experiences of refugees, of promoting empathy with them, and thus recognition and acceptance in the host society and culture.

It is interesting to see alongside this artistic expression a political reaction, addressed (also) to this public. The majority, if not all, websites under study took a position on the government policy on asylum/immigration, explaining it, commenting on it, disputing it, criticising it, and proposing additions to it. Reactions to the White Paper "Safe Haven, Secure Borders" (2002), and subsequently to the new Bill incorporating the White Paper's proposals, appear to be a crucial part of many websites. "New Labour, New Heights of Evil" is the provocatively titled reaction of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants; the Refugee Council had links to two articles on the new Asylum Bill on its homepage (on 3 May 2002). CARF (Campaign Against Racism and Fascism) comments on David Blunkett's (Britain's Home Secretary) proposal of an oath of allegiance for immigrants as denoting "a new era in British racism." This political positioning is an expected tactic of advocacy groups and it is, in a sense, addressed primarily to the government and policy makers. Nevertheless, the online articles referred to above, are also addressed to the general public,<sup>7</sup> given that they are written in a straightforward non-legalistic, and also at times, sensational language. In this sense, such political position taking has at least the partial goal of persuading the public that the government's position is wrong, and attracting the public to its own proposals.

The next type of addressing the general public builds on all the above, and directly asks the public to become involved. This involvement takes mainly three forms: first, the general public is invited to become a member; second, they are asked to support the group's work through donating money; third, to support the



group's cause through active campaigning. A fourth request, clearly associated with the new medium, is to provide feedback and opinion on both the website and the group's work more generally.

All websites studied here represent voluntary, or not-for-profit, groups or associations, and as such they depend on ongoing membership for their survival; the websites can thus constitute an important platform for soliciting new members, and their donations. Links in the form of invitations to join the group abound: "Join Us," "Membership," "Subscription" and so on. The emotive tone returns here: "Please support our work by becoming a Friend of Asylum Aid. Your involvement could literally make the difference between life and death" ([www.asylumaid.org.uk/get\\_involved.htm](http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/get_involved.htm)).

What is of further interest here is that several websites provide an online means for donating money, thus literally capitalising on the new medium's capabilities.

Clearly, ongoing membership and donations are crucial for most of the groups' survival, but for achieving their aims, as stated in their mission statements, they require and request the active involvement of the general public in their campaigning. This can take many forms; some involve the use of other media, such as sending faxes to MPs, which can be done for free at [www.faxyourmp.com/](http://www.faxyourmp.com/), an activist site linked by several websites. More "traditional" media are also used, as in the Asylum Aid's "Campaign to challenge media representations of asylum seekers," which invites people to write letters of complaint to editors, make a complaint to the Press Complaints Commission, or send press cuttings from local papers to Asylum Aid.

Another type of invitation is sent out to people in order to participate in demonstrations, and lists of relevant demonstrations are included in many of the websites, such as for instance the Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers, which provides information on demonstrations and a link to the website of Refugee Week, which "celebrates the contribution of refugees to the UK and encourages people to take a more positive look at the asylum issue in Britain." A final type of request is to provide feedback mostly, but not only, on the website; or else to contact the group for any reason through email.

Evidently, there is nothing in all this that can be claimed as particular to the Internet. However, when such communications were employed by social movements and charities in the pre-Internet era, they were issued *one at a time*: thus a charity requesting a donation may have launched an emotive appeal, a social movement may have used factual information pointing to injustices, or printed posters calling people to a demonstration, but it was inconceivable that all these could be done all together and at the same time from a unique site. Moreover, the Internet has enabled the groups to considerably expand on content, since they are no longer constrained by issues of space and time. They can now go into considerable detail in explaining their argument, and use detailed information, while also keeping an ongoing, constant relationship with the general public through regular updates of the site and through soliciting feedback and emails. In this respect, the Internet has enabled the simultaneous or concurrent existence of multiple forms of publicity, addressed to the general public, and has liberated the groups' communications from considerations of time and space. Moreover, given this time/space expansion, the presence of one type of publicity does not have to be at the expense of another.

In this sense, the Internet appears to be an addition to, and an amplification of,

the groups' voice, since they have now another channel through which to be heard. Moreover, the Internet has significantly contributed to the dissemination of messages and the speed of communication, thereby overall increasing the efficiency of the groups' communication. But there is something more in all this: the descriptive statements, of the "myth busting" and "facts and figures" information, the artistic expression and political positioning – all these constitute different forms of publicity: descriptive, expressive, emotive, and informational, and appear to address the public in different ways, as interested, critical, appreciative, and understanding. These forms of publicity have a political goal, that of persuading the public both in terms of formulating an opinion favourable to refugees and understanding of their predicament, and in more active ways of mobilising alongside the group in protesting against what they see as wrong and unjust. Both efficiency and publicity have, as we shall see shortly, a dominant presence in the next two forms of address.

### Addressing the Public of Specialists

An important part of most websites is devoted to issuing communications addressed to "specialists" – the term used here to denote those with more than a passing interest or stake in the refugee/asylum/immigration issue, including those who are involved in a service relationship with refugees/immigrants. In practice, this amounts to immigration law practitioners, (non-legal) advisers to refugees, other refugee support groups, researchers/academics, as well as the mass media and government/policy makers.

Thus, the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association is almost exclusively addressed to the legal community, in order to "promote and improve the advising and representation of immigrants, provide information to members on domestic and European immigration, refugee and nationality law, [and] secure a non-racist, non-sexist, just and equitable system of immigration, refugee and nationality law"; it offers information on training courses, a directory service, relevant publications, and its own submissions on UK and European immigration law and policy – all addressed to law practitioners. The Refugee Women's Legal Group clearly states that the aim of its website "is to provide practitioners and others working with refugee women access to appropriate sources of information and support to assist in the presentation of individual cases" ([www.rwlg.freeuk.com](http://www.rwlg.freeuk.com)). For this purpose, it offers access to the Swedish guidelines on gender and sexual orientation, as well as information on a book entitled *Refugees and Gender: Law and Process* (Crawley 2001), which can be ordered online. Similarly, the Electronic Immigration Network (EIN) is an online facility which "aims to link major information providers with advice workers and practitioners dealing with all issues relating to immigration, refugee and nationality law and practice in the United Kingdom" ([www.ein.org.uk](http://www.ein.org.uk)).

Legal considerations almost overwhelm the issue of asylum/immigration, constituting the majority of online resources offered by the sites and pointing to a "legalisation" of the debate. However, they are not the only links addressing this public. Thus, the website of the Refugee Council provides information of non-legal nature that is of interest and relevance to refugee advisers. It provides links to a variety of downloadable materials, such as, for instance, to a report entitled "Refugees and progression routes to employment" which "should be of interest to

training and advice services." The Refugee Council further invites refugee service providers to enrol to its relevant directory of "Refugee Resources in the UK." Other links offered by the Council provide teaching material and resources, such as, for example, a booklet containing bilingual words for school use, aimed at newly arrived children. This material is advertised and can be ordered online, but is not free to download. Information on training in asylum advice is offered by the Asylum Aid site, which provides a link to a flyer with telephone and email details of the relevant persons to contact. Another type of link concerns job vacancies: for instance, the Asylum Aid site advertised a vacancy for a caseworker. Recruitment links are also offered by the Immigration Advisory Service, and the Electronic Immigration Network.

This type of specialist information appears to be addressed to both persons and organisations dealing with asylum/immigration. Thus, the Asylum Support Information site provides extensive downloadable information on countries, studies, statistics, and links to sites of other sites of refugee support groups, relevant government sites, email lists and so on. While the Asylum Support Information site is by far the most comprehensive, other sites address refugee support groups as well. The Immigration and Asylum Resource Project, for instance, is addressed to "agencies and organisations in Birmingham and the West Midlands which assist people with immigration problems and asylum seekers" ([www.asylumsupport.info](http://www.asylumsupport.info)), and in its online guise operates mainly as a directory offering address and telephone details of relevant resources. As part of the directory services offered to other refugee support groups, we can include here the various links to the websites of other refugee groups; this cross-linking and cross-citing appears to be an important means of addressing the refugee support community. Similarly, NOTTAS (Nottingham Asylum Seekers) is "a place on the Internet intended as a means to enable local organisations to share and access information quickly, easily and from one source" ([www.nottas.org.uk/welcome.htm](http://www.nottas.org.uk/welcome.htm)). Here, one can find not only statistics on (local) asylum applications and similar information, but also a report on strategies for working with refugees: the site provides a link to a downloadable summary of a report entitled "Towards a Cultural Strategy for Working with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum."

Other "specialists" include the research and academic community: links to academic studies of asylum/immigration issues, as well as country reports are found at the Asylum Support Information, the Institute of Race Relations, and the Refugee Council site to refer to but three. Relevant publications are advertised and can be ordered online, while the research and academic community is also addressed through links to academic sites, through postings, advertisements, and links to conferences, both forthcoming and past.

This public is further addressed in a political manner, through the online publication of the groups' stance towards the relevant laws and policies. As noted earlier, while this political positioning is also aimed at the government/policy makers, as well as the general public, its audience here seems to include other refugee support groups, which can then use this information for their purposes, reproduce it, adapt it, dispute it and so on. Thus, NOTTAS provides a link to the Institute of Race Relations' positioning on asylum, while the Refugee Council refers to the reactions to the new Bill by Oxfam and Amnesty International UK.

In these terms, the main addressees of this political positioning are the government and policy makers. An important qualification, however, needs to be made. While indeed these are the primary addressees of this political positioning, and perhaps *because* they are the primary recipients, the online publishing of the groups' stance appears somewhat superfluous. Indeed, the government/policy community must have been made aware of this stance much earlier, and through a more direct (and less public?) medium. An example of addressing the policy makers can be found in the Institute for Race Relations' link to a report on "The Crimes of National Asylum Support Service" (NASS), which "challenges NASS to review its procedures and policies" ([www.irr.org.uk](http://www.irr.org.uk)). In the online publication of their views, thus, the groups seek to accomplish other goals and to address a different public: first, as already discussed, the general public; and second, and no less important, a public of other refugee support groups. While in addressing the general public the goal seems to be persuasion, in the case of other refugee support groups the goal is more likely to be an informational one, or one of broadening the debate within refugee support groups.<sup>8</sup>

There is, moreover, another public here: the press and other mass media, which can access the refugee groups' websites for their reactions to policy documents. The press is also specifically dealt with in some websites, which have links to a "Press Office" (e.g., the Immigration Advisory Service and the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants). The refugee groups' reactions to policy and other relevant developments are often on offer through (mostly free) subscription to their newsletters; the Refugee Council, Immigration Advisory Service, the Scottish Asylum Seekers Consortium and others, undertake to send their regular newsletter by email to interested parties – which, given that the newsletters mainly contain specialised and detailed information on policy developments and relevant reactions, can be taken to constitute a specialist public.

In assessing the Internet's contribution to all of this, it should first be pointed out that three of the above mentioned websites have an existence only online – the Electronic Immigration Network, Nottingham Asylum Seekers (NOTTAS), and Asylum Support Information, and as such, of course, are rendered possible only through the new medium. In more general terms, three major contributions of the Internet can be identified here: efficiency, publicity and community building, and sustenance. First, in terms of efficiency, the regular updates on legal and policy matters either in the form of site updates, or as newsletters emailed to those interested, constitute a very efficient means of providing the specialist community of legal and other advisers to refugees/asylum seekers with information of great relevance to them. Publicity is the second contribution here: this has a triple meaning; first, publicity in terms of making public, as we saw in the case of the groups' reactions to policy developments, but also, in the provision of links to sites of other refugee support groups, and in the provision of directory and recruitment services. Second, in terms of publishing reports and other material, which can then either be accessed and downloaded online or else, the third type of publicity, be advertised online, and subsequently ordered and bought. Both efficiency and publicity<sup>9</sup> are further implicated in the third Internet contribution, the building of a community of refugee support, which is sustained exactly through the medium's capacities for efficient communication, and publicity. In these terms, an online refugee support community is built around the goal of efficiently disseminating first,

information of relevance to (other) specialists, and of rendering public such information; second, information on other specialists; and third, information on the groups' own views and positions.

Given the extensive literature on virtual communities,<sup>10</sup> the current usage of the term may necessitate some clarification. Drawing on the classic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community), referring to an association based on common and intrinsic values, and *Gesellschaft* (society), referring to a deliberately formed organisation based on rational logic (Tönnies 1974), the "community" of refugee support groups is somewhere in-between. But what the Internet seems to be doing for the refugee support groups is different to either helping them associate on the basis of common values or enabling them to deliberately and consciously form an organisation; indeed, there is no evidence of convergence of the heterogeneous groups into one overarching community or society. Rather, in their cross-linking, and cross-referencing, in their provision of relevant legal and other type of information addressed to other refugee groups, these websites construct what Hannah Arendt has called a "common world" (Arendt 1958); this refers to a shared and public world of human artefacts, institutions, settings as well as human affairs, that provides the context for our activities. While in this usage the notion of the common world is close to the Habermasian lifeworld, we can use the term here to refer specifically to the refugee support groups, and to denote the active ways in which they are constructing a world common to them, which then provides the context for their activities. This has several advantages over the term community, which implies an affective bond, a set of common values, and a physical proximity – for which no evidence can be discerned here. In this sense, the Internet's contribution is both to help create such a world in common, and to render it public.

### Addressing the Public of Refugees/Asylum Seekers

This address covers (at least) three different groups: first, those who are overseas and may be planning to enter the UK, or who may already be in the UK, but are unsure of their legal status; second, those who are already in the UK and have either been granted asylum, or "leave to remain"; and third, the organised aspect of the above two groups of people, that is the associations and organisations representing the community of refugees/asylum seekers. The websites under study address all three groups subsumed here under the umbrella term of refugee public.

First, the websites contain information of central importance to those who intend to immigrate or seek asylum in the UK. This is mainly information concerning the legal aspects of such a move, the conditions under which it may be successful, as well as advice as to how the move should be carried out. This information is not unique to the refugee support groups' sites: indeed, the relevant government site, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, provides all the necessary legal information to those who plan to enter and stay in the UK, and a number of the refugee support groups' sites provide a link to this government site. Nevertheless, the websites under study provide their own advice to those seeking entry, or seeking to legalise their status. Thus, the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) has devoted a part of its website to "Advice," where interested parties can get online advice on appeals, family settlement, visits, student and work applications, nationality, asylum, and so on. The Refugee Council provides "free online" leaflets containing "essential information to asylum seekers and refugees"; similarly, the Asylum



Aid website has a site containing downloadable “information for refugees and asylum seekers.” Of further interest here is that this information is offered in different languages: for instance, IAS has a link to the Bengali version of some of their information, and both Asylum Aid’s and the Refugee Council’s leaflets are available in several languages. More specifically targeted information and advice on seeking asylum is provided by the Stonewall Immigration Group (SIG) who campaign for “immigration rights for same sex couples and asylum seekers” – SIG has prepared a “briefing document,” “to help you identify and understand what is required to make a successful application (for asylum/immigration) under the Unmarried Partners Rule” ([www.stonewall-immigration.org.uk](http://www.stonewall-immigration.org.uk)). Alongside online advice, several websites offer a directory of solicitors specialising in immigration law, while some websites represent groups offering free advice and representation to asylum seekers.

Problems concerning entry and legal status, however, constitute only part of the issues and problems faced by refugees in their quest for re-settlement. Other aspects of life of this marginalised group are often overlooked, and certain support groups (and their websites) attempt to redress this lack. Thus, some websites are also concerned with providing refugees information concerning wider aspects of life; for instance, the World University Service UK has a program on refugee education, and its website offers detailed information regarding this program, including not only information on training and educational schemes, but also on employment opportunities. Refugees Online offers training in new technologies, details of which are found online, while it further supports websites set by refugee trainees.

Other sites provide news and other information of interest to the refugee community. For instance, the RAM Project is concerned with the issue of refugees, asylum seekers and the mass media, and its online existence consists mainly in providing news bulletins of interest to the refugee community; here, one can find stories such as “First ID cards are issued” as well as job offers (e.g., “Internship programme seeks African, Asian and Caribbean journalists”). In a similar vein, “New Vision” is “an online publication by refugees for refugees ... aimed at creating voice for the voiceless ... It will inform the refugee community on current developments and issues relating to immigration, education, employment, health, culture, society etc” ([www.newvision.org.uk](http://www.newvision.org.uk)). The site, apart from news, views, interviews, and a notice board, further offers a free email account.<sup>11</sup>

As noted earlier, there is here another sense of the refugee community, one that includes its organised aspects. In other words, there are groups organised by the refugee community, which are then involved in representing it and its needs. These groups are often addressed by some of the websites under study. The Housing Association Charitable Trust has a project called Refugee Housing Training and Development Project, which distributes funds and expertise on matters of housing to refugee community organisations; in its online guise, the association provides links to information on what the program involves, what type of organisation may be eligible for funding, and a downloadable application form. The Scottish Asylum Seekers Consortium invites the participation of refugee groups in “local multi-agency groups,” which then advise the “Project Team on a range of issues relating to the housing and support needs of asylum seekers and refugees” – all this, however, takes place offline, with the website acting mainly as an advertisement of the activities of the Consortium.



In addressing the refugee community in several of its aspects, the websites under study appear to accomplish mainly two very important things: first, to offer practical help and advice to refugees; and second, to contribute to building and sustaining a refugee community in the UK, thereby empowering one of the most marginalised groups, enabling them to acquire some sense of control over their present and future. The offer of practical advice to refugees comes in the form of, first, the downloadable information on aspects of asylum law and policy – written not for a community of specialists, but clearly addressed to refugees themselves and often translated in their own language; second, through offering directory services, including contact details of legal and other advisors. Moreover, this information can be equally addressed to those already in the UK, as well as to those who may be contemplating a move there. Again, the efficiency by which this information is disseminated is evident. At the same time, the value of the practical information offered to refugees/asylum seekers cannot be underestimated. There is, of course, a question here concerning the actual number of people who may be in a position to access this information; nonetheless, even if we assume that it can only reach a fraction of those who may be in need of it, its contribution is still significant for those people, and this type of wide diffusion has only become possible through the Internet.

In addition, in addressing the refugee community, the websites also “interpellate” it as a community, also here understood as a common world, place a set of common concerns at its midst, set an agenda of issues, imply the availability of mutual help and support, and subsequently sustain this common world through updates, resolutions, stories, news and so on. This building of a common world could conceivably have taken place without the intervention of the websites, and indeed it certainly must have an offline existence, in the physical coming together of people with similar experiences, either spontaneously, or through the help of refugee support groups. Yet the contribution from such a presence on the Internet should not be disregarded; first, in the setting up and running of online publications such as *New Vision*, “voice is given to the voiceless,” as poignantly put in its mission statement; but parallel to this, in the Internet address of the refugee public, such a public is summoned online, and despite the NASS dispersion scheme,<sup>12</sup> the new medium provides a space for a gathering, a “centre,” or a variety of centres, where the dispersed members of this public can come “together” as it were and find out what is new, listen to stories, learn about training and job opportunities and generally become a community, in a more “traditional” sense of the term. In this sense, the Internet’s contribution to the refugee community has both a practical value and a symbolic significance.

### A Return to Theory: The Internet and (Asylum) Politics

Through looking at the publics addressed by the refugee support websites, and the ways in which they are addressed, we have seen the medium’s contribution to efficiency in communication, publicity and, through these, to the construction of a “common world.” Bringing all the threads together, this section returns to the theory of the public sphere, and attempts to gauge the implications of the current findings for the relationship between the Internet and politics, as well as for the application of public sphere theory to the Internet. The following table provides a summary of the findings.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

| Publics                   | General Public                                                                                               | Specialist Public                                                                            | Refugee Public                                                                                   |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Form of Communication     | Mission statement/about us                                                                                   | Legal info for lawyers/advisers                                                              | Legal information/advice refugees                                                                |
|                           | Information/news on asylum/faqs/facts and figures/media myths                                                | Country reports/info on other groups/job offers to advisers/other support groups             | News of interest/relevance to asylum seekers                                                     |
|                           | Expressive/aesthetic aspect: poems, photos, diaries, stories etc.                                            | Educational material for schools                                                             | Information on funds, housing etc to refugee community organisations                             |
|                           | Invitations to participate/donate money/get involved                                                         | Academic studies to researchers/academics                                                    |                                                                                                  |
|                           |                                                                                                              | Offering for sale published material                                                         |                                                                                                  |
|                           |                                                                                                              | Political position taking for government/policymakers/other refugee groups                   |                                                                                                  |
|                           |                                                                                                              | Mass media/press releases                                                                    |                                                                                                  |
| Internet contribution/use | Amplification of groups<br>voice/<br>Simultaneous dissemination of various forms of publicity/<br>Efficiency | Efficiency/<br>Publicity: making public, publishing, advertising/<br>Creating a common world | Efficiency in reach and diffusion/<br>Creating a common world<br>Empowering a marginalised group |

If we were to apply the criteria for the proper functioning of the public sphere and deliberative democratic politics, we can see that only one of the above combinations fits: the general public, but only when it is addressed through the “facts and figures” type of information. Only here one can discern the existence of a critical public, prepared to change its position on the basis of the critical publicity offered to it. The other types of publicity appear to be of the representational type, or at least “managed,” in the sense of being contrived for the purposes of appealing to the public’s compassion (and not reason); they also have an aesthetic aspect, in the form of exhibiting poems, pictures, stories and so on: in this case, the public is supposed to, or expected to, “consume” the contents of this publicity – and not, at least in the first instance, critically apprehend them.

Moreover, in addressing the public of specialists, and in giving practical advice to refugees, the communications encountered online do not appear to be of the communicative action type. First, they are clearly aimed towards success, or the achievement of certain goals. In addressing other refugee groups, such communications are of the instrumental type, in that they are associated with the “task elements” of the groups’ social role as advocates of refugee issues, and advisers to

refugees. In addressing the mass media and the government or policy makers, these communications are of the strategic type, in that they are aimed towards "influencing the decisions of a rational opponent." Moreover, in offering material for sale, they introduce systemic elements in their communications. It is quite obvious that in addressing the public of specialists, refugee support groups are not interested in inviting deliberations, nor are they involved in reasoned argumentation; rather, their use of the Internet and the form of their communications is predominantly of the instrumental and strategic kind. A similarly instrumental use is found in addressing the refugee public, with the information on offer being primarily of practical value. Although some evidence of a debate was encountered, there was no space in any of the 45 websites provided for a public discussion, no forum for deliberations, and no evidence of any interest in using these websites for sparking a wider public debate on asylum politics.

A notable finding has been the symbolic empowerment of the refugee public. Can the results be understood as constructing a counter public? Certain elements of the analysis seem to point to this. Nancy Fraser, arguing in favour of multiple publics and interconnected public spheres, understood subaltern counter-publics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1992, 123), and the counter-public *par excellence* is the feminist one. We can see immediately that this definition cannot fit the current analysis: first, there is a certain lack of equivalence between the publics: the only public that could qualify as subaltern is the refugee public, but this is not summoned by its own members, but rather by support groups which stand in an unequal relationship to them. Second, although the creation of a "common world" points to similarities with the development of a counterdiscourse, this common world does not contain any oppositional understandings, but rather practical information, advice, and guidance that may be of use to the specialist and refugee publics but cannot, on its own, qualify as leading to alternative interpretations of identity characteristic of counterpublics. Moreover, the communication addressed to the refugee public, particularly in its more practical aspect, does not seem to contribute to the formation of an alternative public opinion characteristic of this public. Finally, Michael Warner (2002, 85) has criticised Fraser's conception of counter-publics, arguing that they are no more than "rational-critical publics with the word *oppositional* inserted."<sup>13</sup> In this respect, the instrumental, strategic and expressive communicative formats encountered in the analysis cannot be constitutive of such a public, insofar as they are not conducive to rational critical debate.

Another possible interpretation of the current findings could be that they belong to a cultural public sphere and not to a political one. A cultural public sphere is understood as this space where people aesthetically express themselves and their identities. Habermas (1992) considers this domain as "prepolitical," and thus as having no direct relevance to the core of the public sphere, which should be characterised by rational critical debate. A similar distinction is found in Fraser (1997), who assumes a "perspectival dualism" between culture and politics in understanding dilemmas of social justice in the era of identity politics. Jim McGuigan (1996) in a somewhat different manner discusses the cultural public sphere as this domain of the public sphere that is concerned with matters of culture, although he is careful to point out the relevance of these matters for politics, arguing that rational

critical discourse should apply there as well. All of these authors agree that the public sphere should be characterised by rational critical communication and should be protected by incursions from other formats, such as instrumental and strategic communication. To impose such a division between these spheres, however, seems arbitrary and obtains only when the dominance of the rational critical mode is already unequivocally accepted as the only mode proper to the political public sphere. In addition, although analytically distinct, the empirical division between the two is a very difficult task. In this light, do the expressive elements encountered above belong to a cultural domain? And does this mean that their political relevance is diminished? Moreover, the instrumental and strategic formats do not seem to fit into a cultural sphere, and their political orientation is obvious. To refer these to a cultural public sphere is therefore inappropriate.

Most, if not all, the requirements for the proper functioning of the public sphere and for deliberations to take place within it, were violated in the websites of refugee support groups. But to conclude that the Internet has a negative impact on asylum politics is not warranted, since we have seen how it can amplify the voice of refugee support groups, increase their communicative efficiency, enable them to create a common world, and contribute to the empowerment of one of the most marginalised groups in society. In other words, the overall contribution of the Internet to the refugee support groups appears to be one of strengthening them, of providing them with a more efficient means of conducting their politics – which, if understood in terms of deliberation, is conducted elsewhere. In this sense, the Internet can be seen as strengthening civil society, at least in the sense that it provides it with an extra means or resource. In assessing the Internet's relationship to asylum politics we can then conclude that its actual usage by activist groups contravenes most of the requirements for its functioning as a public sphere, but that this is not detrimental to democratic politics – at least if this is understood as premised in a strong civil society – or what Habermas (1992, 453) calls “a populace accustomed to freedom.”

In this manner, the Internet's current usage can be understood as *preceding*, and *preparing for*, entrance to the public sphere, if this is still understood in terms of deliberation and rational critical debate. But that all this does take place in public, at least insofar as the sites analyzed are accessible to the public, as well as addressing the public (or three publics), casts doubts over this conception of the public sphere. In particular, if publics are addressed not only as rational-critical, but as publics with a stake in politics, if the communications addressed to them are not only oriented towards understanding but primarily towards success and the accomplishment of goals, if all this is taking place in public, and if all this is not only *not* detrimental to the functioning of the public sphere, but indeed necessary to it, and perhaps even its precondition, then it is clear that our conception of the public sphere needs to be considerably expanded. First, the issue of impartiality,<sup>14</sup> requiring that people enter the public sphere a priori prepared to change: the public sphere has to provide a public space for the solicitation of support, and the consolidation and reinforcement of positions – if not, we would have to discard the building of a common world among the refugee support groups, a considerable aspect of the currently observed Internet use, associated with strengthening civil society. Secondly, to the extent that this building of a common world is predicated on an

instrumental and strategic communication, the public sphere should also encompass these. Moreover, accepting instrumental and strategic communications in the public sphere appears to be the only way of enabling activists<sup>15</sup> to conduct politics – otherwise it would be impossible to influence government policy or public opinion in the absence of an ongoing public sphere debate.<sup>16</sup> Further, the public sphere should accept a variety of forms of publicity, including the expressive or representational type; otherwise, the importance of the expressive or aesthetic publicity<sup>17</sup> for the recognition sought by refugees would be discarded to the detriment of a democratic politics understood as striving for justice and equality for all. To conclude, the Internet uses we observed point to an understanding of the Internet not as a neutral public sphere within which to deliberate, but both as a political tool in the hands of civil society, and, to the extent that it is public, as an expanded public space, where politics can be conducted in a multitude of ways. In this respect, the inclusion of the Internet in the public sphere, or the use of the Internet in politics, necessarily entails a revision and expansion of the ways in which the public sphere is understood.

Finally, a note of caution is necessary here: these conclusions have to be seen as tentative and suggestive, pending future research. Although this paper has examined the majority, if not all, of the British online refugee support groups, further research should examine other activist sites, and identify the ways in which the Internet is used in other types of politics. Mario Diani's (2000) work suggests that Internet usage by social movement groups is mostly instrumental, thus agreeing with the current findings,<sup>18</sup> but is this still the case? Are there any other communicative formats present, and how can we understand their outcome? Do any activist sites provide deliberative spaces, and if so, how can the current suggestions be modified or complemented? In theoretical terms, the main finding here, that the Internet facilitates/enables public instrumental communication among refugee support groups, has been interpreted as leading to an expansion of the communicative formats acceptable in the public sphere. This theoretical conclusion needs to be fortified with further empirical research.

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### Notes:

1. These categories may refer to different groups of people yet it appears that any attempts to distinguish between such categories have, for all intents and purposes, served to delegitimise and penalise both asylum seekers and economic immigrants. In this paper the term 'refugee' is taken to refer to all.

2. "Indeed, an element intrinsic to the preconditions of communication of all practices of rational debate is the presumption of impartiality and the expectation that the participants question and transcend whatever their initial preferences may have been (Habermas 1992, 447). Habermas further refers to Cohen's (1989) four conditions for deliberations, including the rational argumentative character of deliberations; the inclusiveness of participation; freedom of external coercion, and freedom from internal coercion, and adds three more: that deliberations aim "at rationally motivated agreement"; that they extend in principle to any matter; and that they include the reinterpretation of prepolitical attitudes, needs and so on (1996, 306).

3. "[T]he mass media ought to understand themselves as the mandatory of an enlightened public

whose willingness to learn and capacity for criticism they at once presuppose, demand and reinforce; like the judiciary, they ought to preserve their independence from political and social pressure; they ought to be receptive to the public's concerns and proposals, take up these issues and contributions impartially, augment criticisms, and confront the political process with articulate demands for legitimation" (Habermas 1996, 378).

4. The issue of the unstable and contradictory character of the Internet, along with an unwillingness to accept this, may well account for the polarised views associated with the cyberutopia-cyberhell debates.

5. Hence, this paper draws a distinction between two aspects of Internet usage: its use by its 'producers', those who have come up with websites, listservs and so forth, and its use by those on the receiving end: the website visitors. The focus of this paper is on the former, and the term 'user' here refers only to those.

6. From this point on, and throughout the discussion of the empirical material, the term 'Internet' will denote the specific Internet usage on the part of the refugee support groups studied here.

7. And, as we shall see later, also to the mass media, looking for a reaction; that may also partly explain the sound bite aspect of some of the reactions.

8. It has to be said though that, with one exception to which we will refer shortly (see note 11), no evidence of any online disagreement between groups, or of any online debate, was encountered in any of the websites studied.

9. Efficiency and publicity are conceptually unrelated terms, and are here only empirically coinciding in this public's address. They are thus not found in a 'nested' rank order but are perhaps better thought as cumulatively contributing to the formation and sustenance of a 'community' of specialists.

10. For a critical review see Keleman and Smith (2001).

11. Of interest here is that there was some evidence of a dispute between RAM and New Vision. In an online article, New Vision announced that it indefinitely suspended all ties with RAM ([www.newvision.org.uk/new\\_vision\\_breaks.htm](http://www.newvision.org.uk/new_vision_breaks.htm)). This is the only evidence of dissent and disagreement within among refugee support groups, indirectly pointing to the existence of a debate, which though appears to take place elsewhere.

12. This refers to the dispersal of refugees/asylum seekers in accommodation/housing across the nation, a scheme ostensibly devised to counter ghettoisation, but also the 'burden' posed on local authorities' resources. The 2002 Bill has made receiving income support contingent upon agreeing to be 'dispersed'.

13. Warner's (2002) argument is that counter publics should be understood as radically oppositional, in the sense of producing and advancing new communicative formats, competing with the dominant rational critical one. He offers the example of a queer public that gossips, prances, acts up and so forth as opposed to engaging in a critical rational debate concerning 'queerness'. In this manner, Warner criticises Fraser (and by the same token, Negt and Kluge (1981) on whose proletarian public sphere Fraser based her own argument) who, although offering a useful corrective to Habermas' original formulation, is limited in viewing publics linked by their identities and substantive contents of their discourses. Rather, in the spirit of the later Habermas, Warner holds that oppositional publics must be thought in terms of proposing an alternative form of communication. In either case, however, it is very difficult to see how the above groups can qualify as a counter public since they are not consistently and exclusively using instrumental and strategic communication, but only pragmatically employing these in their websites.

14. For a critique of the requirement for impartiality in the public sphere see Dean (1996).

15. See Young (2001) for the challenges set by activism to deliberative democracy.

16. Whilst for Habermas deliberations can in principle be resumed at any time (1996, 306), the impetus for such a resumption can only be in the first instance strategic, in the sense that it has to aim at influencing the decision of a rational actor (the state, the policy community, the public in general) to resume deliberations, and only secondarily become communicative or deliberative, in seeking understanding.



17. Although Habermas (1984) discusses the expressive or dramaturgical mode of communication, he does not seriously consider its political significance.

18. However, the current findings cast some doubt over Diani's distinction between symbolic and instrumental uses, since we have seen here how practical and instrumental discourses can have symbolic gains.

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## Appendix: British Refugee Support Groups on the Internet

1. Amnesty International UK – <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/action/camp/refugees/>
2. Asylum Aid – [www.asylumaid.org.uk](http://www.asylumaid.org.uk)
3. Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees (AVID) – [www.aviddetention.org](http://www.aviddetention.org)
4. Asylum Support Information – [www.asylumsupport.info](http://www.asylumsupport.info)
5. Bridge Project on the Web – <http://www.bridgeproject.co.uk/>
6. Bristol Defend Asylum Seekers Campaign – [www.geocities.com/bdasc](http://www.geocities.com/bdasc)
7. Cambridgeshire Against Refugee Detention – [www.srcf.ucam.org](http://www.srcf.ucam.org)
8. Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (CARF) – <http://www.carf.demon.co.uk/feat56.html>
9. Children of the Storm (child refugees) – <http://www.cotstorm.demon.co.uk/index.html>
10. Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers – [www.defend-asylum.org](http://www.defend-asylum.org)
11. Electronic Immigration Network – [www.ein.org.uk](http://www.ein.org.uk)
12. Ethiopian Community in Lambeth - <http://www.refugeesonline.org.uk/ecl/index.htm>
13. Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers – <http://members.lycos.co.uk/garas/>
14. Immigration Advisory Service – [www.iasuk.org](http://www.iasuk.org)
15. Immigration and Asylum Bill – <http://www.bwrap.dircon.co.uk/1&AINDEX.htm>
16. Immigration and Asylum Resource Project – [Http://home.btconnect.com/Asian-Resource- C/IARP/index.htm](http://home.btconnect.com/Asian-Resource-C/IARP/index.htm)
17. Immigration Law Practitioners Association – [www.ilpa.org.uk](http://www.ilpa.org.uk)
18. Institute of Race Relations – [www.irr.org.uk](http://www.irr.org.uk)
19. Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants – [www.jcwi.org.uk](http://www.jcwi.org.uk)
20. Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture – <http://www.torturecare.org.uk/>
21. National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns – [www.ncadc.org.uk](http://www.ncadc.org.uk)
22. New Vision for Refugees and Asylum Seekers – [www.newvision.org.uk](http://www.newvision.org.uk)
23. North of England Refugee Service – [www.refugee.org.uk](http://www.refugee.org.uk)
24. Northern Refugee Centre – <http://www.northernrefugeecentre.org.uk/>
25. Nottingham Asylum Seekers – <http://www.nottas.org.uk/welcome.htm>
26. Oxfam GB: Asylum Seekers in the UK – [www.oxfam.org.uk/campaign/cutconflict/asylum/intro.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/campaign/cutconflict/asylum/intro.htm)
27. Positive Action in Housing – <http://www.paih.org/>
28. Refugee Action – [www.refugee-action.org](http://www.refugee-action.org)
29. Refugees, Asylum-Seekers and Mass Media Project – [www.ramproject.org.uk](http://www.ramproject.org.uk)
30. Refugee Council – [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)
31. Refugee Housing, Training and Development Project – [www.hact.org.uk](http://www.hact.org.uk)
32. Refugee New Arrivals Project – <http://www.twiza.demon.co.uk/rap/index.htm>
33. Refugee Legal Centre – [www.refugee-legal-centre.org.uk](http://www.refugee-legal-centre.org.uk)
34. Refugees Online – [www.refugeesonline.org.uk](http://www.refugeesonline.org.uk)
35. Refugee Save Haven Campaign – [www.safe-haven.org.uk](http://www.safe-haven.org.uk)
36. Refugee Women's Legal Group – [www.rwlg.freeuk.com](http://www.rwlg.freeuk.com)
37. Rwanda Community Organisation in the UK – <http://www.refugeesonline.org.uk/umubano/index.htm>
38. Scottish Asylum Seekers Consortium – [www.asylumscotland.org.uk](http://www.asylumscotland.org.uk)
39. Sierra Leone's Women's Forum UK – <http://www.refugeesonline.org.uk/slwf/index.htm>
40. Stonewall Immigration Group – [www.stonewall-immigration.org.uk](http://www.stonewall-immigration.org.uk)
41. Student Action for Refugees – [www.star-netwok.org.uk](http://www.star-netwok.org.uk)
42. Students Against Campsfield (detention centre) – <http://www.closecampsfield.org.uk/campaign.html>
43. Sudanese Women's Association – <http://www.refugeesonline.org.uk/swa/aboutus.htm>
44. Westminster Diocese Refugee Service – <http://www.wdrs.org/>
45. World University Service UK (Refugee Education and Training Advisory Services) – [www.wusuk.org](http://www.wusuk.org)