# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERNET COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC DELIBERATION

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### Abstract

The article addresses recent structural changes in the public sphere related to media as platforms for debate and deliberation. New media platforms for communication lead to changes in the communication structure itself. This can easily be seen in the differentiation processes of the public sphere that is now taking place: The differentiation of topics, styles and actors is an astonishing phenomenon, is constantly a topic of debate in itself, often labelled as both decay and democratisation. I argue that as Internet-based media take actively part in, and accelerate the internal differentiation of the public sphere, the role and function of the public sphere is put in a new light. Inner divisions of labour in the public sphere emerge, which forces us to reconsider conventional understandings of the political public sphere vis-à-vis political deliberation. The article addresses this new complexity of public discourse and presents a revised view on its democratic functions. I argue that as a consequence of the Internet, social and political theory need to distinguish between a presentational and a representational dimension, each serving different functions. I also argue that the altered media composition underlying the public sphere suggests a more network-like view on national and international public spheres.

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## Introduction

Habermas' main question in his keynote address to the media researchers at the ICA conference in Dresden on June 20, 2006 was whether deliberation in the public sphere actually introduces an epistemic dimension to political decision-making, i.e., whether the public sphere can bring new insights and solutions to politics today. Habermas has previously given arguments for the potential of the public sphere, but what can be said about the current condition in western democracies? The volume of political communication in the public sphere has expanded dramatically, but it is at the same time dominated by non-deliberative communication. Habermas argues that there is a lack of an egalitarian face-to-face interaction and reciprocity between speakers and addressees in a shared practice of collective decision-making (Habermas 2006, 414). More importantly, the very dynamics of mass communication, Habermas (2006, 414) claims, are driven by the power of the self-regulated system of the mass media to select and shape (dramatise, simplify, polarise) information. Quite interesting, he presents something of a media-centric argument, suggesting that the increasing influence of radio and TV fosters increasing ignorance, apathy and low-level trust in politics: 'The data I have mentioned suggest that the very *mode* of mediated communication contributes independently to a diffuse alienation of citizens from politics' (Habermas 2006, 424). However, the strategic use of political power to influence and trigger agendas and issues is according to Habermas also an increasing problem. In other words, in the public sphere of communicative action, strategic action has continued to intervene.

To Habermas, these facts do not refute the validity of the deliberative model of democracy, because the public sphere precisely has the function of 'cleansing' or 'laundering' flows of political communication. From the processing and compartmentalising of the wild and diverse communication (entertainment, shows, news reports, commentaries, etc) in the public sphere, politics struggle to select relevant information (problems, arguments, solutions). As a platform for the public sphere, the media sector possesses certain rules, which the players must play according to, in order to be taken seriously and to be efficient. Through deliberation, the public sphere is able to raise issues, provide arguments, specify interpretations and propose solutions. In the public sphere, demands from social movements and interest groups in the civil society become translated into political issues and arguments and articulate manifest, reflexive public opinions. The model of deliberative communication, Habermas argues, provides a critical standard to which disturbances and constraints in the public sphere can be criticised. For reasons of legitimacy, the political system must keep itself open to the political influence of society. The public sphere thus links to established politics and to the civil society, which must empower people to participate in informed, public discourses.

In his talk, Habermas addressed the Internet only in a footnote, pointing out that interaction on the Internet only has democratic significance insofar as it undermines censorship of authoritarian regimes. In democratic countries, however, the Internet serves only to fragment focused audiences 'into a huge number of isolated issue publics.' Habermas claims that 'within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallise around the focal points of the quality press, for example national newspapers and political magazines' (Habermas 2006, 422).

From this statement, one could get the impression that Habermas considers the mediated dimension of the public sphere as mainly composed by the press, increasingly challenged by radio and TV. But this impression would certainly underestimate Habermas as an observer of contemporary changes. Rather, I believe that his passing and relatively dismissive judgement on the Internet derives from his prime interest in the public sphere seen from the point of view of political democracy, not from the point of view of the media. Habermas is primarily concerned with the deliberative legitimation of politics in differentiated and complex societies, which requires some kind of public focusing and ordering of issues and solutions. In Habermas' examination, this leads to a focus on a) *national* rather than on local and regional or global public spaces; b) on the *political* public sphere at the expense of the literary/cultural public sphere; and c) most importantly here, on the dimensions of the political public sphere that *directly* influence legitimate, political decision-making by providing thematic focus and consolidation.

If the research problem is not deliberative legitimation of politics *per se*, but rather the significance of Internet communication in the public sphere, we need to address the diversity of communication that has indirect influence on the political system in addition to the communication with direct influence, and the role of the Internet on both. My strategy in the following is to examine the functions of our current amorphous and complex public sphere, in order to see transformations followed by the widespread use of the Internet and personal media. The arguments I would like to develop are as follows: 1) The use of the Internet contributes to the diversity of views and the broadening of participation, but it complicates observation of the political public sphere from the point of view of politics and the state. In this, the Internet seems to reverse the effect of mass media. 2) The public sphere should be seen as consisting of two general dimensions or 'faces,' each oriented towards different solutions and problems.

## Differentiation of the Public Sphere

The press, cable TV and national broadcasting distribute mass communication from relatively few, centralised senders to a large number of unconnected receivers, who receive the communication in more or less similar ways. The mass media thus functions as centralised filters of public communication. Due to the cost of (mainly advertising-funded) production, content tends to be mainstreamed and directed towards the imagined, implied average receiver/consumer. Content are pre-produced in a limited number of editorial centres and then disseminated widely for mass consumption. The possibilities for feedback are extremely limited.

These features are often seen as contra-productive and disadvantageous for an active, participatory public sphere. However, they fill a very important function of the public sphere, the function of *focus,* in terms of both content and form. The standardised, narrowed and centralised agenda of the mass media enables the political system to mirror its own deliberation in the public sphere and become visible for the citizens. The problem with the mass mediated platform is not the mass media structure itself, but that this structure has only been complemented by place-bound, face-to-face interaction. I am not referring to the concentration on the international media market (which constitutes a democratic problem indeed) but the inherent structure of mass media and mass communication. While it inhibits

participation and diversity from below, it allows for an organised harmonisation and convergence of meaning as an interface of the public sphere for the society to observe. The amorphous public can thus be identified and referred to, and mobilised as a platform for democratic politics. We should however, remember that the vast *numerical* majority of mass media in Europe (newspapers, weeklies, magazines, journals, local radio, and TV stations etc.) have modest circulation and audiences, but which makes them more sensitive to the *diversity* of topics, people and events of interest.

The Internet-based structures of communication, including e-mail, mailing lists, wikis, blogs, chat groups or network sites like Facebook, all base their existence on information and communication from their users, including a wide variety of participants, events, views and topics. Not surprisingly, media theory and Internet-research turned rather quickly to Habermas' study of the early European bourgeois public sphere and to theories of deliberation. Theories of deliberation addressed precisely what the Internet seemed to offer: possibilities for formation of productive enlightening and public opinion on a much broader scale than previously seen in history. This provided formation of public opinion as a medium between citizen preferences and political institutions. Several studies have demonstrated that digital forums of various sorts have the capacity to create engagement and generate critical discussion about important issues of common public interest (Coleman & Gøtze 2001). Several studies have examined the ability of the Internet to carry public deliberation (for an overview see Dahlberg 2001). A number of studies conclude that the Internet increases the number of social contacts and relationships because it generally increases the opportunities for interaction (DiMaggio et al. 2001, Wellman et al. 2001, Uslaner 2004, Cummings & Craut 2002). It is also argued that Internet activity does not take place at the expense of offline interaction but instead supplements it (Frazer 2000, Gershuny 2003, Lievrouw 2001, Shah et al. 2001). For instance, several studies of social capital and Internet use indicate that Internet use increases and supplements civic involvement (Wellman et al. 2001). Voluntary and political work in NGOs and social movements now requires the use of the Internet, and associations in music, sports, the arts, etc. generally use the Internet to communicate internally and to announce their existence on the Web. A general conclusion is that discussion forums on the Internet contribute to the critical public sphere, whether locally, nationally or internationally by reproducing normative conditions for public opinion formation.

However, Habermas correctly argues that the Internet plays a secondary role (if not as marginal as Habermas seems to think) in the realm of formal politics. In order for a blogger or a group on the Internet to have political impact, their message must in almost all cases be picked up by the mass media. And before we go on to modify the model of the public sphere according to the media development of the last decade or two, we should also keep in mind the naïve wave of cyber-democratic enthusiasm that tends to confuse political and technological realities (Benkler 2006). What is technologically possible may not be socially favourable. For instance, even if hypertext makes it technically possible to connect issues, publics, arguments, and facts, research shows that this possibility is often not applied in practice. Moreover, although it is perfectly possible to engage in civil debates on discussion forums, such forums often report problems of uncivil communication in

various forms. What seemed to worry Habermas is precisely that such uninhibited communication evades responsible editing mechanisms. A substantial amount of Internet interaction seems to be nothing more than hasty, unfocused and inconsistent chat because of the expansion and democratisation of access to un-edited discussion that the Internet offers.

First, what Habermas calls 'issue publics' overlap with publics with interest in social and political change, which is pursued through other media. Membership in various publics, either with respect to themes or media (magazine readers, human movements activists, bloggers, TV-viewers, etc.) is not mutually exclusive. Second, the diversity of Internet communication (measured as the scope of issues and viewpoints, degrees of civility) is larger than in the mass media, thus representing the worst and the best from the point of view of rational discourse. To control the explosive growth of information on the Net, socio-technological tools are developed to search, filter and target the available information (such as tags, filters, blog-lists, RSS-feeds, search engines, meta-sites, tracking systems, etc). Third, with the Internet, the collective, mainstream nature of the hitherto mass mediated public sphere has become more in tune with individualisation in modern society. With interaction rather than reception, subjective preferences and viewpoints are more easily articulated and linked to others, reproducing webs of intersubjectivity. The autonomy and self-realisation typically associated with the modern individual 'fits' better with the public sphere partly reproduced through what I call personal media. Personal media represents the modern individual's communication tool in that they allow not only for social interaction with friends and relatives, but also for critical judgement vis-a-vis others in weak-tie associations that are linked together with new and old media.

As personal media allow more people to produce texts and take part in communication, the Internet offers new forms of access to public authorities, new channels of coordination and influence for social movements, and a multitude of more or less stable settings for chat and discussions. On all accounts, digital media provide quite different circumstances for communication than the mass media. The most central ones can be listed as follows:

1. Social Movement activity (Internet, blogs, email, wikis)
2. Discussion and chats among citizens (blogs, chatrooms, e-mail lists)
3. Citizen access to MPs and public authorities (Internet, e-mail, blogs)
4. Online 'participatory' journalism (Internet, email, SMS, MMS, blogs)
5. Connections and weak-tie networks (sites such as Facebook and MySpace)
6. User-generated content in broadcasting (TV, radio, Internet, SMS, blogs)

In contrast to the public sphere once entirely dominated by public encounters and the mass media, the Internet and personal media propels a more differentiated public sphere, both in terms of topics and styles, as well as with respect to the number and variety of participants. The current public sphere are more niche-oriented because of a more diverse media-scape, but also because of a more ethnically and culturally pluralistic society in general. First, the diversity of *topics* is broader than in the mass media; It has been argued that the nature of topics in the more recent representational dimension of the public sphere are more particular, private and local than the mass media, in spite of the global reach of the net (Becker & Wehner

2001, 74). However, it is also the case that global or international issues are constantly discussed, even if in individual and local ways. Second, the span of *styles* and *genres* (informality, impulsivity, rhetoric styles, politeness, civility, etc.) far exceeds the mass media. Third, the number and diversity of *voices* is considerable compared to the mass mediated public sphere (children, youth, uneducated, etc). Individuals may change between the roles of general relatively passive citizen and more active and specialised communicator.

The differentiation of topics, styles and participants transforms the public sphere as well as how we view it in relation to democracy and culture. With regard to all three differentiation trends, the driving force is the personalisation of media on the Internet, thus enabling the individual to voice opinion directly to public power, to participate in campaigns and social movements, and to exchange opinions on online forums in her own ways and language, drawing upon personal experiences, knowledge, engagements, values and judgements. Because the threshold for speaking out on the Internet decreases, more people do so, and thus increasing participation lowers the threshold even further. And yet, because the threshold is still much higher than watching the television news, more involvement and interest accompany Internet participation. One tends to appear more as a person who is interested in particular themes and interests rather than someone who is simply being a citizen among millions (Becker & Wehner 2001, 74). Whereas the mass media produce homogeneity, the multitude of Internet fora seems to produce a heterogeneity that has, I might add, difficulties in controlling itself communicatively.

Consequently, the Internet accelerates the differentiation of the public sphere in terms of topics debated, styles applied and persons involved. The diversity of communication on the Internet is in part caused by anonymity and quasi-orality (and therefore more extreme viewpoints and considerably uncivil characteristics, as well as unconventional ways of argumentation), diversity of communication forms (from chat forums to blogs and homepages with comment functions), and diversity of inter-textual connections between forums (hyperlinks, RSS feeds, network sites). In its reciprocity, heterogeneity and resistance to censorship it stands in a complementary position to the mass media. Particularly the national and international mass media enable broad attention around some prioritised public topics 'of national interest,' and so serves as a resonance for national and international politics. The Internet and personal gatherings underline the individualisation and segmentation of modern societies, in that attention and engagements are spread among a wider range of topics, which make a political focus difficult to trace.

As a modern response to a dynamic democracy, the digital dimension of the public sphere offers less guidance for politics but more possibilities for expression. Compared to the journalism of mass media, online journalism tends to be more compartmentalised and based upon self-selection and personalisation. The criteria of selection are to be composed by the individual. Rather than offering carefully edited information, it offers a differentiated space for interaction and for presenting user-composed information, which tends to be rather specialised, and is also closer to personal opinion, rumour and unconfirmed information. Whereas the mass media works toward conformity and common denominators, the Internet is more oriented towards particular interests. It is located 'between' the mass media public and face-to-face interaction such as public meetings, rallies, etc. (Becker & Wehner 2001, 75).

Studies also show negative side effects of the new forums: polarisation of debates, isolation of issue-based groups, unequal participation, lack of responsiveness and respect in debates and incivility. For these and other reasons, the value of digital forums in a public sphere context is questioned. A main problem addresses their numerous, local, segmented character, which makes it difficult to see how their normative communication may integrate into larger sentiments of public opinion (Kraut et. al 1998). What seems to be lacking in many forums on the Internet is a culture for civil, public communication, or simply a public culture. Due to the lack of personal experience in an open space and the absence of editing functions, communication often has a private style, in spite of its open and widely accessible nature. In spite of being public, it draws on genres for private communication. This has two negative consequences: 1) The discussion has problems with the complexity of the issues discussed, and 2) the discussion has problems reaching a self-referential, self-critical level where the normative aims of the discussion are subject for discussion. In other words, the responsibility of public communication (publicity) is not taken into consideration in the nature of the interaction.

Still, the vast majority of these forums fulfils some basic requirements of a public sphere: they are (as are the mass media and local meetings), committed to improve social conditions one way or another, and also to free speech and open dialogue. They are also committed to make themselves understood and to understand others in an open space of an assumed indefinite audience, if for no other reason than to make rhetorical shortcuts or reach compromises. Some sort of communicative or cooperative action with embedded validity claims may seem to be at work here.

At first glance, there are few and weak functional equivalents to editing and regulatory agencies, like editors, journalists and judges (Bohman 2004, 143). However, there are in fact plenty of intermediaries on the Internet, as in online journalism and moderators, filters and other software systems, the norms of social movements and organisations, which all serve to normalise communication in one way or another. In spite of its 'anarchic' nature, much of the communication on the Net is embedded in larger normative frameworks that tend to discipline interaction. Second and more importantly, we should not assume that the Internet is isolated from the mass media and face-to-face meetings as a platform for a public sphere. The intertextuality of meaning and communication in and out of forums in the public sphere are innumerable. The lack of intermediaries on the Internet is less of a problem than it may seem, precisely because it is so integrated with face-to-face and mass mediated interaction.

## The Public Sphere as Communication Networks

A network-like description of the public sphere suits the pre-Internet era as much as it does the current era. However, with Internet access on nearly all computers the development has accelerated in different directions. The Internet has intensified the circulation in time and space. It has radically lowered the barrier for interaction of all forms by combining the written and audio-visual speed and scale of the mass media with the interpersonal dialogue of face-to-face interaction. Since the emergence of e-mail in 1972, the Internet has come up with software that has presented a wide range of communication structures. The distinction in mass media between producer and audience is suspended, as is the case with the

distinction in face-to-face interaction between physical place and social space. This creates the possibility for a wide range of recombined communication situations. What seems to emerge is a more network-like, distributive dimension of the public sphere (Benkler 2003). This carries with it a greater democratic potential in terms of participation, but with some democratic deficit in terms of focus and reflexivity. This however, is about to change, or 'normalise' itself. The Web may structure the organisations that apply it, but it also becomes heavily influenced by them. The Web in our context is not technology, but a possibility for communication that quite naturally takes shape from its institutional contexts.

What is of importance in Benkler's understanding of a 'networked public sphere' is that smaller Web sites are linked thematically together, constituting clusters of public communication. However, there is also a concentration of attention on a limited number of Web sites. As Benkler (2006, 235) argues, "A tiny number of sites are read by the vast majority of readers, while many sites are never visited by anyone. In this regard, the Internet is replicating the mass media model, perhaps adding a few channels, but not genuinely changing anything structural." Exactly how concentrated the Web structure is in terms of linking and attention has been measured with network analysis. The results span from power law structure, to a distributed network structure. Still, search engines like Google point the reader towards relevant information. Against Cass Sunstein's argument that the Web is increasingly fragmentary, Benkler argues for a networked public sphere of inter-linked sites and arenas of communication. The polyphony of debate, argumentation, agitation and mobilisation constitute, in an abstract sense, a complex sphere of public communication and about matters relevant for all.

What Benkler describes is not only relevant for public communication on the Internet, but for the public sphere in general. The most viable way of understanding the current public sphere in Europe is precisely as 'polyphony' – as a network of networks of sites of communication. Also, Habermas (1996) has used 'network' as a metaphor for the current public sphere without elaborating on this further. Empirical research on the quality of the public sphere needs to consider the Internet as a functional complement to the mass media and face-to-face interactions. A vibrant and democratic public sphere depends on its internal composition and dynamics, particularly whether the direct interaction, the mass media and personal media based on the Internet are integrated with one another through overlapping networks of individuals, themes, opinions and knowledge crossing in various ways and shapes between its 'compartments' and realms. In fact, the Internet itself serves as a useful metaphor for the public sphere in general with regard to its distributed circulation of proposed problems and solutions, norms, sense making, and so on. One strategy to clarify this empirically would be to apply network analysis software to detect hypertext links between local, national and international websites. Another approach would be to focus on certain distinct issues (e.g. Turk membership in the EU, the EU Treaty debate, or the climate change debate) to see how argumentation in various media refer to each other or are interlinked in other ways. Regardless of the specific results, such analysis would conclude on *degrees of connectedness* within a population. In this perspective, there are no counter-public spheres detached from the main public sphere and no plurality of public spheres. There would only be interconnected 'nodes' of debates and counter-debates, publics and counter-publics.

The connections between such discursive nodes expand the range of arguments, problems and solutions, and widen the range of quality of argumentation.

Consequently, in this network perspective the political public sphere is considered as an open and complex network of networks of ideas and arguments about public themes, a place where agents and powers seek to make judgements and legitimate statements and actions. This definition accomplishes the following: (1) it stresses the function of the public sphere as a space of communicative legitimacy; (2) it excludes the motivations of individual and collective actors; (3) it excludes the actual media and arenas of communication, and, as I will return to in the next section, (4) it includes the imperative of both diversity and focus of communication, and (5) includes both the chat-like and deliberative character of public communication.

## Two Faces of the Public Sphere

The discussion so far suggests that the increasing differentiation of communication in society has turned the public sphere into a realm that cannot be understood non-dimensionally. As an effect of complexity, the public sphere has developed an internal division of labour. This fact has been addressed by several observers of public communication in historical and political contexts. I would like to comment on this and subsequently to connect this to the Internet and personal digital media.

Nancy Frazer (1995) makes a distinction between soft and strong versions, where the strong version influences the public debate, whereas the softer versions have influence that is more indirect. Bernhard Peters (1997) distinguishes between public communication involving the mass media and public events, demonstrations and happenings, and a deliberative public sphere involving rational argumentation. The first kind of public communication includes experiments, expressive, affective and aesthetic expressions including transitory and issue-oriented controversies, and demonstrations. The latter kind specifically includes the justification of arguments and statements regarding public affairs, which the political system relates to in their parliamentary and legislative processes. The first kind injects vitality, provocation, fresh ideas and new arguments into the public sphere. The second deliberative public sphere provides reasoning and rational justification, and is located 'between' the political system and the wider sphere of expressive public communication. These two forms of public communication are also called public communication and public discourse. The latter consists of a smaller segment of the first, as it is oriented towards deliberation with arguments and facts. Similarly, Van de Steeg (2002, 508) distinguishes an empirically specific concept of public discourse from the wider concept of the public sphere, where the first constitutes the aggregate of texts and media debates, and the latter constitutes its potential and reference background. Public discourse refers to a finite number of issues that circulate between media and communicative contexts, and where some form of public opinion formation emerges on the background of the reservoir of the public sphere. Eriksen (2005) distinguishes between a general public sphere with free access to opinion formation processes, transnational-segmented publics of experts and policy-developers dedicated to distinct topics, and strong publics such as parliaments, in the political system. Eriksen thus includes will-formation

of the political stem in the public sphere. Also, the EMEDIATE project at the European University Institute made a distinction between the hard public sphere as the dimension of a political public sphere that is directly relevant for a democratic society, and the softer, non-institutional public sphere (Schulz-Forberg, 2005). These ideas indicate an internal functional duality within the public sphere as they distinguish analytically between a 'thick' and a 'thin' dimension of that sphere. The thick dimension includes the vast universe of cultural, expressive, pseudo-private statements, whereas the thin dimension includes deliberation in a stricter sense. The question then is how the mass media and the personal media of the Internet position themselves vis-à-vis these distinctions.

I distinguish between two dimensions of the public sphere, related to both topics, style and participants, and with reference to different functional emphasis. The *representational* dimension refers to the heterogeneity of topics, styles and groups that take part, and which reflects culture and everyday life, only seen before in everyday conversations and more or less peripheral social settings (clubs, parties, unions, therapy groups, etc.) With the expansion of this dimension through digital media, the public sphere is now becoming increasingly differentiated and diversified with regard to people, issues and attitudes. In a numerical sense, it is becoming more democratic and inclusive. This dimension is oriented towards culture, sports, science and everyday life, as well as politics. In the representational dimension, extensive differentiation of themes and styles are not balanced by generalisation.

The second dimension – the *presentational* dimension – refers to the deliberation over common issues by central figures acting as voices of the people. It presents a public agenda and an expression of public opinion to politics as a resonance for rational decision-making. Its procedural ideal is rational discourse of argumentation and reasoning. It is primarily oriented towards homogeneity, focus and the political system (but it never fully enters it). This dimension is at the centre of Habermas' concern. Historically, the mass media has been a vital cause and effect of this differentiation of communication. In this context, they represent increasing complexity and contingency. However, equally important is that the mass media generalise communication by allowing variation within certain standards or common denominators that transcend singular contexts. By applying recognisable genres and referring to a limited number of issues, communication and understanding becomes 'less improbable,' to use Luhmann's phrase, by stabilising expectations. In this way they reduce contingency, and in relation to political democracy they enable mutual observations between the public sphere and politics. This function of generalisation is predominantly effectuated in the presentational face of the public sphere.

How the Internet is involved in these two dimensions is an empirical question, and empirical research more than indicates that the Internet serves the representational dimension more than the presentational. Increasingly, the political system examines the possibilities of the Internet as a forum for political will formation and deliberation, but such attempts are risky. Due to the proliferation of personal media among individuals, they are used mostly as channels for citizen activity in the civil sphere and everyday life. The heterogeneity of Internet communication stands in a dynamic relationship to the homogeneity of the mainstream mass media, through a wide range of mechanisms of selecting, filtering, styling, formalisation and restructuring. If such integration occurs, reciprocity emerges between the

presentational and representational dimensions. More precisely, in such a dialectic process, the mass media present mainstream issues (and mainstream positions to those issues) to the broader audience, as well as to the central powers of politics, economics, courts, sports, entertainment and social movements. On the other hand, substantial information and communication on the Internet is produced and consumed by segments of the public that are differentiated culturally, demographically and politically.

A dynamic relationship between its presentational and representational faces implies that the public sphere serves its purpose as a political and cultural institution. Both dimensions serve basic functions to a democracy that depends on and appreciates both efficiency and diversity, both a strong public opinion, which motivates politics on main concerns with the help of journalistic and entertainment techniques, and pluralistic and direct dialog among its citizens. Diversity is increasingly important, not least because the mass media in most countries tend to be subject to concentration in large-scale media cartels. Conversely, a focused and mainstreamed public sphere compensates for the complexity, extremity and intransparency of partial, issue-oriented, public contexts.

It may sound like a contradiction in terms to say that the public sphere both increases and reduces complexity of social interaction, but indeed this is the paradoxical effect of handling differentiation. As topics move interferensically and transcontextually between the presentational and representational dimensions of the public sphere, the increasing complexity that results from new topics, styles and participants is kept under control through its ability to concentrate the wide audience among some focused themes and *vice versa* – the focused and generalised agenda of the public sphere continuously receives fresh meaning from the open-ended, partly non-institutionalised diversity of Internet media and small mass media.

The criterion of quality of such a new public sphere is derived, therefore, not simply from the relationship between the mass media and politics (which is a main focus in contemporary political science and media research). Nor is it only a question of (the lack of) diversity in the mass media due to concentration and competition (another heavily researched problem within the area of political economy). Empirical research on the quality of the public sphere needs to consider the Internet as a *functional complement* to big mass media and face-to-face interactions, as well as consider the effects of this complementary relationship. A vibrant and democratic public sphere depends on its internal composition and dynamics, particularly where the two dimensions are integrated with one another through networks of media, themes, opinions and knowledge crossing in various ways and shapes between its 'compartments' and realms.

In order to understand the interrelationships between the two faces of the public sphere as well as their connection to political democracy, Habermas' two forms of discourse – the moral and ethical-existential – may be instructive (Habermas 1996). The public sphere possesses two faces of similar kinds, which can be assumed analytically in order to understand the functions of the public sphere. We should see the public sphere as a medium between individual voices of a public on the one hand, and the political apparatus on the other. The public sphere transforms and transfers individual opinion into public opinion for the political system to

take into account. A *voluntas* becomes transformed into a *ratio,* a consensus about what is practically necessary in the interest of all. To carry out this task, the public sphere must front both the people and politics, by addressing problems and issues as both moral and ethical-existential, and juggling issues between the two. Whereas the moral deliberative discourse is directed to politics and common problems and alternative solutions, the ethical-existential discourse constitutes its social and cultural foundation, its reference background and test bed, its source for ideas and fresh thinking, with less conformity and fewer constraints pressing for consensus – discourse that is marked by more controversy, drama, agitation and passion. The ethical-existential discourse is more characterised by religious values and convictions that rarely become modified through discourse.

## Conclusion

With the pluralisation and individualisation of society, differentiation became a problem in the public sphere. The active use of personal media is one factor that led to difference and what Pellizoni (2003) calls (with Kuhn) incommensurability. This difference is a major challenge for theories of deliberation. In Rawls and Habermas, rational deliberation must find some common ground, whether based on ethical values or moral arguments of justice, leading to consensus or binding compromises. However, a fragmented and differentiated public debate is not to be avoided, and the increasing use of personal, digital media only accelerates the trend. While the Internet is often seen to be an obvious argument in favour of deliberative models of democracy, it also poses some serious challenges due to the increasing fragmentation and complexity inherent in its construct. When we examine the basic normative assumptions of the idea of a public sphere, it becomes clear that the Internet and personal media bring about changes in conjunction with other transformations in society, which pose both new problems and solutions to democracy.

While digital media brings increasing participation (and inequalities), fresh viewpoints and new solutions, it is harder to see how they enable consolidation and oversight. I do not argue that personal media are antithetical to the idea of a public sphere, but that they contribute much more to diversity than to convergence. The legitimacy and effectiveness of the public sphere and the democracy as a whole are dependent not only diversity, but also on coherence. How is the modern public sphere able to tackle its own indeterminacy, fragmentation and complexity? In Habermas' model, procedural debates ensure that consensus does not have to rely on common ethical values to be actualised. The model assumes pluralism, not ethical conformity. This, however, requires that the discursive threads in various media and forums actually become connected. This is not necessarily the case with the Internet. Both sociology and media studies have focused on individualisation and the dependence of the individual on expert systems. The consequences for the public sphere have been underestimated.

The possible solution is multi-levelled, dwelling both inside and outside the media, encompassing personal media and particularly the mass media. The mass media fronts this process *vis-à-vis* the national political systems. This will be the status quo for many years to come. The reason for this is not simply technological conservatism, but is related to the structural features of the media as suitable carriers for a public sphere with democratic and political ambitions. The mass media are

characterised by a rupture between senders and receivers, with underdeveloped possibilities for feedback. This essential feature allows public opinion to disseminate and circulate among elites and intellectuals, to be dealt with by languages of expertise, to transform into relatively consensual bodies of ideas, and to be easily scanned by the political system. Voices of opinion have the possibility to observe, to understand and to learn from one another.

Whereas big media outlets such as national public service broadcasting and the larger quality newspapers can be regarded as the main arenas for a public sphere, political deliberation is increasingly inter-medial in that discourse circulates through very different kinds of media, from amateur blogs to *Financial Times*. The question of media's influence on public discourse is therefore a more complex question than in the previous newspaper-based or more broadly, mass-mediated (and unmediated) public sphere. However, because the postmodern approach ignores the legitimacy question entirely, I think it is essential to distinguish between media of diversity, which enhances the pluralism of topics for society, and media of focus, which represents what potentially becomes the agenda for formal politics. Whereas the Internet still tends to belong to the first group, elite quality newspapers and some broadcasting programs tend to represent the latter group. Thus, in spite of widespread intermediality of the polyphony of public communication, the specifics of various media types tend to coincide with what I have termed the two faces of the political public sphere.

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# i-journalism & e-citizenship

## The 29th EURICOM Colloquium on Communication and Culture
## Piran, October 15-17 (tentative dates), 2009

# CALL FOR PAPERS

The 2009 CCC colloquium will be focused on citizens' participation and representation in the media in the context of global processes of media concentration and convergence. We expect the participants to address issues of:

- implications of contemporary global technological, economic and political changes for the fulfilment of fundamental democratic functions of journalism and the media to provide information, stimulate citizens' participation in public debate, and facilitate citizens to participate in the media in terms of content they produce and organisational participation;

- alternative approaches to democratise communication in the public sphere, such as reforming the media from within based on the initiatives by professional media/news-workers; creating new 'alternative' media with autonomous publics by citizens' groups and non-governmental organisations seeking to participate more fully in public life while bypassing the corporate media; and promoting changes in media environments;

- the relationships between journalists and their sources; between citizens-generated content and the mainstream media; between news and blogging, the role of televised audience discussion programmes, phone-ins or talk-radio, web publishing, 'grassroots' materials in the news production and i-journalism; and generally between citizen participation, main stakeholders' actions in media governance, media gatekeepers, and media audiences.

Suggestions for papers with abstracts are invited until May 1st, 2009; final papers are due by September 1st, 2009.

Send abstracts or any requests for further information to:

Slavko Splichal (slavko.splichal@guest.arnes.si)