DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESENTATIVE PUBLIC SPHERE

HANS-JÖRG TRENZ

Abstract

This article analyses how digital media redefine the boundaries of the political public sphere. Against the mainstream assumption of a new emancipatory potential of the digital media, which strengthens the participatory and interactive elements of the public sphere, it is argued that digital media introduce a new representative order of political communication. In this sense, there is a need to conceptualise the digital public sphere in relation to political representation. Digital media do not straightforwardly unbound political communication in replacing the representativeness of the national public sphere. The performance of the Internet in promoting political communication remains rather limited and, by and large, continues to reproduce the national public sphere. At the same time, the digital media have multiplied the symbolism of representation, which is continuously in the making, by providing new offers for the identification of publicness through shared problems and solutions.

Hans-Jörg Trenz is Research Professor in Arena, University of Oslo; e-mail: h.j.t@arena.uio.no.

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Introduction

Jürgen Habermas (1962) based his classical account of the emergence of the modern public sphere on the critical and universalising force of publicity that slowly undermined and ultimately replaced the old representative order. The starting point of this thought was that representation is something external to the public sphere and alien to its neat functioning. In his early work, Habermas has paid, however, only minor attention to the question of how to accommodate the public sphere, and its striving toward unbound reasoning, from political representation with democracy, and its striving for self-government through Parliamentary channels of interest intermediation and representation (Manin 1993). The kind of self-evident solution was found in the establishment of the national public sphere and its representative institutions through which the citizenry of the democratic polity could be constituted.

Any search for the conditions of the public sphere beyond the nation state needs to depart from this ambivalence in relating public communication to the representation of the democratic polity. One way to tackle this problem would be to rely on an exclusive relationship reviving the original notion of the public sphere as a facilitator of communicative exchange and reasoning that claims universal validity beyond the representation of particular interests, values or traditions. From this cosmopolitan perspective, the transnationalisation of the public sphere is not only held as principally possible, it is also warmly welcomed as a new departure of the public sphere to unbounded political communication from its encapsulation in the nation state (Beck 2005). Such a new democratising potential to release public discourse from its national bonds has been discussed with a particular attention being placed on the new digital media. The Internet was welcomed as a powerful global communication tool that was said to open the first truly boundless space of communication. Virtual communication anywhere is communication everywhere. The democratic credentials of the Internet would rely entirely on participation, not representation: everybody would gain instant and affordable access to global information, and everybody would be enabled to publish to the world. As the bourgeois public sphere of the late eighteenth century has left behind the ancient representative order of the Courts, the new digital public sphere would thus unfold a potential to leave behind the representative order of the nation state (McNair 2006, 135ff.). Can the digital era defreeze the representative institutions of the national public sphere and thus carry on the unlimited force of publicity that was first discovered by the reading publics two centuries ago?

This article proposes a second reading of the contemporary transformation of the public sphere in response to global culture, and to the new communication technologies provided by the digital media. As I will argue in the following, the opening of new spaces of global communication need to be discussed mainly in relation to a change of the representative order of the public sphere. The challenges to the integrity of the nation state are linked to new ways of representing public discourse and reasoning that proliferate through New Media. The conceptual task to be tackled is therefore to define an inclusive relationship between public communication and representation. The public sphere is not simply an open space of free-floating discourse; it is always constituted as a representative order linked to particular institutions (mainly media) that confine public discourse in a particular

way and with regard to a collective representation of the public. The empirical question that follows is: how does the contemporary transformation of the institutional infrastructure of the public sphere change the collective representation of the public? What are the new (or old) ways of representing the "public" of public communication?

The Public Sphere as a Representative Order

In his historical reconstruction of the structural transformation of the public sphere, Habermas (1962/1992) postulates a shift from the principle of representativity to the principle of discursivity as the central mode of legitimating political order. This transformation is historically manifested in the replacement of the courts by the institutions of the bourgeois public sphere. The old representative order unfolded through the attributes of distinguished persons, their habitus and entitlements. It created an aura of distinction through which the few chosen representatives staged their public appearance. The represented were addressed in a top-down hierarchical way. As such, their role was basically limited to obedience and ovation. The new reasoning publics instead were organised around the private autonomy of individuals who stood in a reciprocal relationship towards each other. The individual was placed in a justificatory relationship towards herself and the other. Individuality and freedom of action needed to be defended by providing good arguments and justifications that were equally considered by all. The striving for emancipation of the individual was thus linked to the collective search for truth and understanding. Reciprocity became the guarantee of bottom-up collective will formation (ibid, 58ff).

In the Habermasian tradition, public sphere theorising has always emphasised the emancipatory elements of democracy, assuming that citizens should be actively involved in the political process and participate in shared problem solving (Cohen and Arato 1992; Peters 2008; Eriksen 2005). The public sphere was perceived as a counter-weight to political representation. What was formerly represented now needed to be legitimated through public reasoning. Publicity turned away from the staging of distinguished persons within an impersonal system of purposes, to the justification of individuality within a social system of role attribution and collective goal attainment. Public sphere theorising thus applied a neat distinction between representation and discourse, as shown in the following matrix:

Table 1: Representative versus Reasoning Publics

Representative	**Reasoning**
Attributes	Arguments
Staging of personality	Justification of individuality
Distinctiveness	Equality
Show, image, aura	Critique, analysis, investigation
"Schein" (Appearance)	"Sein" (existence)
Top-down, vertical	Bottom-up, horizontal

Yet, there was also a critical aspiration in Habermas's early work to denounce the return of the representative elements of the public sphere in late nineteenth-

century mass democracies. Critique was displayed in his attempt to describe the bourgeois public sphere, not only in ideal typical forms (the institutions of the public sphere), but also to specify the standards through which democratic legitimacy is generated (the idea and the ideology of the public sphere). The latter principally refers to the private autonomy of the citizens as the precondition for the realisation of popular sovereignty through the public use of reason. In a second step, these critical standards allow Habermas to uncover a structural transformation of the public sphere that is brought about by the surrender of publicity to the media economy of Western capitalism. The displacement of the representative public sphere of the court by the participatory public sphere of the citizenry that was set in motion with the enlightenment and the emergence of so-called reading publics at the end of the eighteenth/beginning of the nineteenth century was in this sense never concluded. The reasoning publics of the bourgeois-liberal democracies were transformed into the consuming publics of mass democracies. At this stage, Habermas speaks of the return of the representative elements and the re-feudalisation of the public sphere, which again replaces the argument with the image and the discourse with advertisement.

The distinction between representative public and reasoning public was needed for defending a normatively thick notion of the public sphere. The evolution from representation to deliberation was seen as emancipation and as such, it became intrinsically linked to the project of modernity (which, however, remained incomplete in the nation-state framework) (Beck 2006). The devolution from deliberation to representation, in turn, was needed to unfold the critical force of the public sphere in facing its own deficits.

From a sociological perspective, this neat division between representation and deliberation has always been questionable. The emergence of the modern public sphere was rather analysed as a shift in the justificatory practices of the representative institutions of modern society (Salvatore 2007). This idea is also held up by historical research, which has emphasised a functional linkage from publicness to the collective imagination of nationess (Eder 1985; Giesen 1992). Deliberation and reasoning are then not seen as superior principles to representation, they rather point to a change in the justificatory practices through which modern society represents itself and attributes political legitimacy.

In retrospective of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European history it became clear that the consolidation of the national public sphere and its institutions was again relying on the building of representative links to the citizens and consumers as constituents of the national mass publics. In constitutional theory, this historical incidence was upheld as a paradigm, claiming that there was an intrinsic link between the institutional infrastructure of the national public sphere and the ways national publics were signified through collective acts of representation (Offe 1998; Preuß 2004). The citizenry of the nation state became the unquestioned resonance body for the unfolding of public reasoning, and this in spite of the fact that its representation was actually not foreseen by the dynamic unfolding of free and open discourse (Eriksen 2005).

Against this tradition of upholding a dividing line between discourse and representation, I will uphold in the following that public discourse needs to be primarily perceived as a representative act. The proliferation of the discursive ideal can thus

be historically reconstructed as a new mode of perceiving political representation (Laclau 2005). Discursivity has itself become an image that is displayed in the staging of a new representative order. The performance of discursivity by political institutions in relation to their publics is therefore not simply to be criticised as pseudo-discursivity, or as a part of PR and image politics. It is rather the central element of any public performance of political authority and government.

My guess, therefore, is that any definition of the public sphere in purely participatory terms will remain incomplete. The idea of a participatory public sphere should rather be read as a particular form of self-representation of a social-political order that covers its representative elements. As I will contend in the following, any attempt to define the public sphere as a network through the connectedness of free and autonomous individuals falls short of recognising the element of publicness that is constitutive to any collective space of shared orientations and concerns. Consider Couldry et al. (2007, 5) who have proposed introducing "public connections" as the constitutive element of the public sphere, and as the key empirical precondition of civic engagement. As such, they resonate with theories of participatory democracy assuming that citizens should be actively involved in the political process and participate in shared problem solving. While emphasising this active component of building public connections, the authors recognise, at the same time, that public communication is necessarily rooted in common culture and experience. This is contained in the problematic term *public* (as distinguished from private) which is defined as an orientation to issues of shared concern (ibid, 6). The identification of *shared* concerns implies, as the authors recognise, an orientation to a collective space, "where in principle, problems about shared resources are or should be resolved, a space, linked at least indirectly, to some common frame of collective action about common resources" (ibid, 7).

A public sphere is in this sense always more than a network, precisely because it is linked to the reflexivity of communication to create an image of itself. If public connections, before being activated, rely on collective orientations, the representative elements of the public sphere come back in through the backdoor. A discursive sphere based purely on the networking of self-interested, private individuals would be a sphere without publicness. The closer individuals interact and talk to each other directly, the less they rely on the public sphere. The latter, to the contrary, allows for the imagination of the collective in all situations where direct interaction has become unattainable. This specific modern case of communication without interaction is made possible through a change of the representative order of society. The public sphere is thus constituted as a sphere of public connectedness, in which active participation is almost absent, and interaction remains mainly virtual. Such a public sphere builds "connectedness" mainly through shared meaning and discourse (i.e., through representation) and not through interaction (i.e., through participation).

In the following, I will propose that public sphere research should also try to re-introduce representation in relation to the new transnationalising dynamics of media communication. For that purpose, I will discuss some particular features of the digital public sphere as s a hard test case for the thesis of the primacy of representation in the generation of public reasoning and justification. This is to argue against the mainstream assumption that the digital public sphere has replaced the

representativeness of the national public sphere, unfolding a new emancipatory potential and strengthening the participatory and interactive elements of political communication.

Identifying the Representative Elements of National Media Spheres

While normative political theory was mainly interested in the critical function of the public sphere as a mechanism for controlling power and state policies, a sociological perspective has highlighted this integrative function of the public sphere in upholding the unity of the polity. Representation covers this possibility that the public sphere is also shaping the social imagination of a political society, the kind of reflexivity that does not only inform the state, but also the self, of the public as a political entity. It assumes the role of an "arena of cultural creativity and reproduction in which society is imagined and thereby made real and shaped by the ways in which it is understood" (Calhoun 2003, 249). "To see the public sphere entirely as a realm of rational-critical discourse is to lose sight of the importance of forming culture in public life, and of the production and reworking of a common social imaginary" (ibid., 257). The modern public sphere has opened an arena for the performance of a wide range of actors and intermediaries that provide justifications engender trust and creatively perform in front of a larger audience. At the moment that something is made public, representation enters the game. In this sense, public discourse always unfolds through representative acts of particular speakers who perform in front of a wider audience.

In the national public sphere the representation of political actors and institutions in front of an audience (the electorate) was made possible by the evolution of the free press and public broadcasting and television. With regard to these traditional media, the following modes of representation can be distinguished:

1) Representation of speakers: Representation is displayed in the way political actors make public appearances and frame political interventions. The arena of political contestation is also a *public* arena to the extent that actors' performances take place in the presence of an audience. Public sphere theorising is all about how the (physical or virtual) presence of the public changes the interactive game between speakers. The dialogue (basic relationship between A and B) is turned into a public appearance (assuming the presence of C). The silent third is the principal reference point of representation to the extent that speakers react or anticipate the expectations of an audience (Eder and Trenz 2003).[1]

2) Representation of the public: Audience research has emphasised that publics are not simply to be considered as the passive element of political communication. They are an intervening factor, to the extent that they get an idea of themselves and control the demand and the prizes of news on the market (Philo 2008). One achievement of national mass publics is that consumers of particular media develop an idea of the meaning of belonging to a particular audience. The readers of a newspaper feel part of the same community that shares similar attitudes and opinions. In particular, the free press has developed this self-understanding of being the representative voice of a politically reasoning public.

3) The stratification of publics: The unfolding of democracy within the national public sphere is further based on the assumption that some publics represent

others. The idea of stratified publics has, for instance, become essential in the operationalisation of a process of collective opinion and will formation as a filtering exercise that reaches from strong reasoning publics to general mass publics (Peters 2008, chapter one). In this regard, it has been critically noted by Habermas himself that the small reasoning publics tend to become esoteric publics of representatives (Habermas 1962/1992, 218). The representatives of the enlightened public need to distinguish themselves from the obscured opinions of the masses. Representation thus leads to a stratification of the public sphere, in which one (larger) part of the public can only be represented by the small group of distinguished and talented persons who have developed particular capacities to enter into public reasoning. Habermas speaks accordingly of a "*deklassierte, repräsentativ abgestufte Öffentlichkeit*"[2] (ibid., 219). A new form of "bourgeois representation" is made possible through procedures that allow some publics to represent other publics. We then have two publics: one that is real and that is made up of countable and present persons (a strong public in Nancy Fraser's words) and one that only exists virtually as an idea and that is not *real*, but *effective* (the term weak public is inadequate because the virtual public might be more effective than the real public) (Fraser 1992).

4) Self-Representation: A democratic public sphere ultimately re-presents itself through its own normativity. The modern public sphere has replaced the sovereign monarch but has taken over the representative principle. As Gitlin (1998, 168) put it, "the public sphere represents the ideal, the unmoved mover and sacred sphere against which violations and deviations are to be measured." In delineating a shared normative belief system, the public sphere creates the critical yardstick for evaluating its own incomplete performance. Theorising the public sphere is in this sense about conceiving the unity of its form against the plurality of its practices. Nancy Fraser (2007) was most explicit on this point in defending the intrinsic normativity of the public sphere against purely descriptive accounts of globalising communication. Without such a sacred sphere, the imagination of popular sovereignty through collective will formation would remain incomplete.

These last sceptical remarks by Nancy Fraser already indicate that the intrinsic normativity of the public sphere as a critical yardstick for collectively entering into democratic practice cannot simply be abandoned when it comes to the delimitation of transnational spheres of communication. The expectation is also that a transnational public sphere can only be constituted by applying and renovating this normativity. To evaluate the digital media as a political communicator we need to take up this core normative heritage that is re-presented by the national public sphere. As I will argue in the following, the democratic credentials of the digital media depend on its (thus far rather uncertain) capacity to link back participation to representation. If the common assumption holds true that digital media emphasise mainly participation, how can a representation of the public sphere as a unitary sphere of public opinion and will formation be achieved? Despite its promises in normative terms, the Internet is a deviation of the classical account of the democratic function of the media: traditional mass media (in particular the press) need to re-present public reasoning. How can this function be taken over by the Internet? The question is: *What re-presents the Internet*?

Representation in the Digital Era

On the basis of these thoughts on the basic links between the national public sphere and political representation, I would like to suggest an understanding of the digital public sphere as a new representative order of political communication. This is counter-intuitive, because we are used to praising the Internet for opening up new spaces of participation and discourse. As such, the Internet has been analysed mainly as an instrument for strengthening the participatory elements of democracy. The potential of the Internet is further discussed in light of the crisis of political representation in Western societies. Facing the growing mistrust in national governments and parliaments in many European countries, the Internet has the potential to again turn the citizens more active and to confront their representatives with the direct voice of the people (as expressed, for instance, in dialogue forums and new forms of e-governance) (Norris 2001).

The digital media are thus mainly analyzed in its capacity to break up the representative order of political communication, as it has been demarcated by the nation-state and has enhanced a new cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 2005). How can we interpret the change in the mode of political representation from the national public sphere to the digital public sphere? Along broad lines, the constitutive elements of the representative order of the national public sphere are changed as follows:

1) Representation of the diversity of speakers: While traditional media work towards unitary representation of the members of the political community, the Internet systematically promotes diversified representations of its multiple users (Cheong et al. 2008). National print and audiovisual media constitute the central arena of public visibility and competition among national political actors that are re-presented by the journalists. The Internet has outmoded this function of general interest intermediaries, who select, frame and interpret political news and who speak to the "whole of the nation." In the Internet, the exposure to political news is increasingly dependent on the consumption choices of individual users, who make use of personalised news formats to steer the filtering process and design their own news worlds (Sunstein 2001, 7). Digital media contents are also increasingly produced by the self-publishing activities of the users who are empowered to become their own newsmakers and interpreters. With the proliferation of personal homepages, the representative image has become independent from the "framing" of the providers. MySpace, Facebook and the millions of personalised homepages have, primarily, a self-representative function through which users promote their own image or claim for distinctiveness. At the same time, the Internet – as reflected in the popularity of Youtube – arranges for the showing off of diversity as curiosity and entertainment.

2) Representation of the diversity of publics: The Internet has become a big opportunity for the "unrepresented" minorities to enhance their public status, but for many, it has also reduced the scope of communication and the chances of finding public resonance.[3] Public distinctiveness results in a net loss of publicness. The digital public sphere further falls apart into a growing number of user communities, discussion groups or public enclaves. These "multiple publics" have different degrees of openness and accessibility: many of them retreat into the semi-private sphere, protecting their spaces through passwords or accession fees, others distinguish

between member spheres and open spheres, others, again, launch their messages into the open space overloading the web with information. The segregation of the public can be desired, but all too often, it is a consequential effect of the market, which reserves only small niches for a new user community.

3) Fragmentation of the public sphere: Early analysts of the Internet spoke of a new digital divide that would accentuate the stratification of the public sphere between privileged users and illiterate masses (Norris 2001). Such fears seem to be largely ungrounded. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary that the Internet has dramatically lowered the costs of information and enhanced the capacities of resource poor groups to participate (McNair 2005, 138). Contemporary critics rather speak of the danger of a new fragmentation of the public sphere, observing the absence of horizontal interaction between the segregated user communities. The Internet is in this sense not a public sphere, but falls apart into more or less separate public sphericules (Gitlin 1998). As such, the Internet opens up many identity-offering spaces but looses the common framework for social experience. It would increasingly produce self-representations with only an acclaimed status of publicness.

4) Cosmopolitan self-description: Finally, the emergence of the Internet made it necessary to re-address the normativity of the public sphere and to adjust its standards to a changing media reality. The traditional telos of unity, consensus and integration would lead to a normative overstretch in negotiating the diversity aspects of a cosmopolitan order (Beck 2006). A new normative template is applied by emphasising diversity and cosmopolitan values. The open question is how the new media environment that pays tribute to diversity can also facilitate new democratic practices at the local and global scale. The democratic credentials of the digital media remain uncertain as long as the new imagined communities cannot be empowered by entering into an encompassing process of public opinion and will formation (Fraser 2007).

Compared to the national public sphere held together by the unifying force of print media and television, the digital public sphere results in the loss of publicness. The question to be raised here is not how to convert Internet communities as pseudo-publics into real publics. The fact that they are virtual communities does not distinguish them in principle from the virtual publics of the past. The unified national public is not substantiated, but merely maintained as a common normative horizon, and as such commits diverse people to the search of shared understanding and the possibilities of self-government (Trenz 2008). The question, therefore, is rather how the proliferation of the many digital publics shall contribute to the imagination of *a* public. What can justify the *publicness* of the digital public sphere?

Towards a Global Newsroom?

The potential of the Internet as a political public sphere is barely understood. Most studies focus on the role of the Internet as a political communicator. Particular attention has been paid to how new information technologies empower particular groups and actors. The information society has been analysed in terms of knowledge production, distribution and access assuming that technological innovation would automatically be linked to global societal transformation (Castells 1998). Less attention has been paid to how new information technologies re-structure the public spaces of political communication through which relevant information is selected

for particular audiences. For the first time, the digital media make a space for global news production and distribution technically possible. The optimistic assumption, therefore, is that online news-making would open new spaces of transnational democracy linked to the emergence of a global public sphere (McNair 2005, 118ff). This potentiality of a global public sphere supported by digital media is, however, at odds with the persisting fragmentation of our political spaces. There is thus a discrepancy between the emergence of a global media culture and environment and its democratic empowerment in territorially fragmented spaces that merits further research attention.

The argument I want to develop in the following is that the normative self-description of the digital public sphere as a cosmopolitan virtual public, for the time being, remains detached from its institutional underpinning through which such a normativity can unfold and become effective. The performance of the Internet in promoting political communication, that is, communication with the capacity to identify publicness through shared problems and solutions (Dewey 1927), remains limited and, by and large, continues to reproduce the national public sphere. The consumer of the Internet is confined to markets or to entertainment, which is not by itself political, as some would claim. With regard to political communication, traditional spaces and online spaces of news-making and distribution still coincide. Reasons for the limitations of the Internet as a space of political communication can be enumerated as follows:

a) *Dominance of traditional news media as information provider:* The monopole of traditional news media as the main information providers of the national public sphere is not broken. Internet news is frequently a "waste product" of mainstream print and television news. The digital media have introduced a new divide between institutions of news production and channels of distribution, but they have less affected the space in which political news unfolds and finds public resonance. Old players like newspaper journalists maintain a monopoly of news production but have lost the control over news marketing, distribution and interpretation, which is increasingly taken over by new digital media. This development has rather constrained the existing national spheres of political communication in terms of declining informative quality and debate, but it has not substantially opened new spaces of political communication. The new players that make use of online technologies come in as distributors of political news that has mainly been produced by others. As such, they can successfully compete for public attention, but are also parasitic of the functioning of traditional news producers like news agencies and professional journalists.

The dominance of traditional media as information providers is corroborated by empirical research. Koopmans and Zimmermann (2007) have systematically analyzed how search engines link to political news. The Internet had surprisingly little impact on the general pattern of national news production through mainstream print and audiovisual media. For the average Internet user, the main providers of political news continue to be the platforms of their favourite newspaper or television channel (Koopmans and Zimmermann 2007). The survey further indicates the growing definitional power of governments and institutional actors as sources of political news in the Internet and as nodal points of networks of news distribution. Civil society actors and social movements are, with regard to news production and interpretation, even less visible in the Internet than in quality newspapers.

b) *Legal restrictions*: National newsrooms are legally protected. Without mentioning forms of censorship or the filtering out of political news by public authorities, which is still rather common in many countries, also Western democracies recur to a number of very efficient measures to close down national news markets. Public broadcasting, for instance, is only understood as a commodity to national users (who pay license fees) and its world-wide diffusion through satellites is encumbered by the use of new encrypting techniques, which exclude external audiences. Private cable television, on the other hand, is offered in packages, which are based on the most commercialised national television channels and exclude public television from European neighbour countries. Also the Internet faces serious constraints, for example, in the form of copyright restrictions, in its attempt to open nationally protected news-markets.

c) *Language and user preferences*: The national segmentation of political news is enshrined in the very structure of the digital media which assigns national addresses to the information providers, and thus aligns virtual communication not only linguistically but territorially. For the average Internet user, language is still the main barrier when navigating through the WWW. Only few news providers like Guardian.unlimited, FT.com or NYT.online can claim to reach a global audience with their daily news outlets. The enhanced cosmopolitanism of the English speaking elites cannot compensate for the closure of localised news worlds and the loss of informative value of the many digital news formats that come as a by-product for users of Internet services such as Yahoo, Google or Microsoft (which, by the way, also offer their services to nationally segmented publics). The Internet differentiates into national niches, where consumers draw political information mainly from national and often purely local websites. For the majority of users, the main reference point appears to be the local community, and their user behaviour is limited to participation in local fora or chats, reading local newspapers or following the events of local groups and organisations. More systematic audience research is needed to underscore this hypothesis of a localising rather than globalising effect of the Internet. In the long run, this might even affect the integrity of the national news space by restricting the common horizon of shared issues of concerns and unifying political debates.

Also, blogging as a form of vanity publishing undertaken by those for whom conventional forms of publications are not available is firmly entrenched within national or local public spheres and is basically inaccessible for outside users. This does not mean that blogs are irrelevant. Yet, the main American online news servers and blogs, like Huffington Post, with hundreds of thousands of daily readers, are illegible for most European users. Debates are narrowly defined and mainly self-referential. They are made for particular sections of American users, who understand the codes and share the concerns. The blogo-sphere is in this sense firmly embedded within the national public sphere establishing a specialised conversation among nationals, referring mainly to national topics and networking among national journalists and media products.

d) *Commercial logic and boulevardisation*: The dominant market logics of the Internet seem to reinforce this fragmentation of the political news landscape. The experience shows that profit can be best maximised by providing specific news formats that address national and local publics. The success strategy of single providers on the media market consists precisely in offering contextualised products

to individual consumers (Gurevitch and Levy 1990). The Internet has perfected this market logic of delivering ready-made news on demand directly to the consumers. While the old media have still nourished the conscience of the citizen, who has de facto been treated as a consumer, the Internet has replaced the citizen with the individual user, who is still treated as a consumer. Never has it been easier for the citizens to opt for those news outlets that reflect their values and political affiliations and to filter out all news and opinions that do not immediately confirm their worldview. As a consequence, citizens might indeed gain autonomy from the representative chains of nationally closed news systems. At the same time, they are certainly not integrated in a new globalised news space, but rather fall apart into millions of different user profiles that are served by their individual news providers. In the Internet, everyone finds their own truth, and these many individual profiles, carefully registered by the providers, create their own news worlds; their own, private representative spaces.

To the extent that the WWW is penetrated by these commercial logics, the quality of impartial and objective political news is difficult to uphold. Some quality newspapers like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany only provide online news for subscribed users; many other quality newspapers in Europe enter into a spiral of boulevardisation, splitting up their online and print editorial offices. A further boulevardisation of the online news is a likely scenario. In a world without professional journalists, quality controls are difficult to uphold and the objectivity of news and informative values count little.

Conclusion

The introduction of new media has always brought about important changes in the infrastructure of the modern public sphere affecting the techniques of news production and distribution. New media have thus far, however, rarely challenged the normativity of the public sphere, which claims validity within particular political spaces. By maintaining the normativity of the public sphere as a constant variable, each new medium has attracted similar hopes and anxieties. New media are analyzed according to their potential to stimulate, engage and integrate or alternatively to distract, disintegrate and fragment the political space (Couldry et al. 2007, 26). The digital media are no exception in this regard. Their cosmopolitan self-description aims at a re-definition of the political space, in which the public sphere unfolds, but not at a re-definition of its normative contents.

This article has suggested that the democratic credentials of the Internet measured against the old template of the public sphere should be analysed not so much in terms of enhanced participation, but rather as a change in the representative mode of political communication. If representation is defined as an "*Öffentlichkeitsanspruch*," a claim for publicness, then the Internet is indeed unfolding as a representative space through which global diversity gains public visibility. Whereas in the traditional national public sphere, distinguished representative acts were performed in front of a large audience, the Internet allows every single user to make a public performance. This results in a loss of distinction and publicness. The Internet publishes, but does not necessarily create publics. It multiplies claims for publicness and representation but minimises the spaces of public resonance. The role of the many information providers thus shifts from giving inputs to public

reasoning and deliberations to self-representation, self-advertisement and image politics.

It is in this sense that the kind of publicity that is promoted by the digital media has a structural affinity to the representative authority of the feudal era. By publishing in the Internet, communicators create an aura of personal representation which does not primarily search argumentative force, validity and consent but seeks to proclaim truth and authority. The Internet is the Court that unfolds prestige and reputation. The archetype of this unfolding of representation is the guestbook, which collects the acclamations and the appraisals of the visitors (critical voices are often censored by the providers).[4] At the same time, the digital media have multiplied the symbolism of representation, which is continuously in the making, by providing new offers for identification. The re-feudalisation of the public sphere is therefore not necessarily part of the history of its decline, as Habermas famously argued almost 50 years ago. Representation through the digital media is no longer aristocratic but democratic; its manipulative moment has become impracticable, as many would-be manipulators populate the field competing for the ever scarcer resource of public attention.

The demonstrative publicity of the Internet should therefore be understood as the rediscovery of the representative elements of the public sphere. As such, it is not in conflict with the critical publicity of the bourgeois public sphere, but rather continues its normative self-description.

Notes:

1. Like in the theatre, this includes, of course, also the possibility of directly addressing the audience, which, however, becomes a secondary and not a constitutive element of the performance within the public sphere.

2. "An outclassed public arranged in a hierarchical way according to representative levels."

3. One should distinguish here between unplanned exposure against planned exposure to political news and information (Sunnstein 2001, 32). In the public sphere (e.g., a town square) people have unforeseen encounters (e.g., a protest rally of some minorities) to which they can nevertheless feel attracted to or, at least, decide to pay some attention to. In the digital sphere, the filtering activities of the user make such surprises increasingly unlikely. In similar terms, newspaper readers or television users can be exposed to unknown or challenging arguments, which are more easily filtered out or ignored by the Internet users.

4. Also, the distinction between provider and visitor is a reminiscence of the old Courts: the visitor of a website has to show respect, they have to acclaim, otherwise they are punished and banned from the page.

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