THE INTERNET AS A NEW CIVIC FORM

THE HYBRIDISATION OF POPULAR AND CIVIC WEB USES IN FRANCE

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Abstract

The article argues that, beyond the boundaries of activists and concerned citizens, the massive appropriation of the Internet techniques of self-publication and the social modes of interactions on the web, lead to the extension of the public sphere to the rank-and-file. It takes the position that civic culture is not homogeneous and that it is shaped by different social practices that we examine through three sets of digital public spheres. First, the rise of "free speech" in professional journalistic practices on media websites expands to readers' voices (in forums, online surveys, readers' comments), while citizens' engagement in amateur grassroots journalism challenges both the professional practices and the ethics of journalism. Second, the lively political blogosphere demonstrates how personal opinions on public matters find their legitimacy in the interactive dialogue in and across networks and lead to the emergence of rank-and-file opinion leaders, while also presenting various pitfalls, such as the redundancy of a limited number of viewpoints. Third, the social and leisurely Internet usage of ordinary citizens leads them to confront political and public issues in a casual and random manner, which in turn leads them to discuss these matters occasionally in online or face-to-face settings. This trend is reinforced by the innovative creation of user-generated content, mixing text, sound, and video formats that are widely circulated on the web. The rise of new forms of political and social critique on the Internet and the sharing of common experiences in the electronic space results in novel mean of public engagement and contributes to the shaping of a new civic and social form.

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As soon as the Internet reached the mainstream and became an integral part of the everyday lives of millions of people in developed countries, some essayists suggested that it had the potential to increase the participation of citizens in public affairs and political matters, and that it could even help alleviate the crisis of representative democracy where ordinary people are disconnected from public affairs. This dream has not come true, since the uses of ICTs do not merely stem from the availability of communication devices, but are also the product of many complex social, political, cultural, and economic factors (Jouët 2000). If the Internet has not become the ideal electronic agora that some expected it to be, it nevertheless contributes more and more to the revival of the democratic debate in our societies. Political web communities based on online peer cooperation have proliferated and are well covered by research. Moreover, the horizontal communication process on the Internet has allowed the inclusion, beyond the boundaries of activist practices, of all willing lay citizens, in a participatory e-debate of public issues. Furthermore, the civic practices of ordinary web users in seeking information and occasionally sharing comments, including on the social networking sites, demonstrate the extension of the electronic public sphere to the majority. Even though the democratisation of the public sphere on the Internet remains a limited phenomenon due to the digital divide and to the fact that many users disregard such practices, this phenomenon is important enough to have shaped a new civic culture based on digital expression and the spread of interactive peer-to-peer networks.

This new form of social and political critique reflects a broadening of the public debate that is no longer restricted to the elite. This article delves into the role that the Internet plays in all social strata. It takes the position that civic culture is embedded in the daily life practices of citizens and that it covers a broad range of activities, from information seeking to discussion and engagement in public matters. This definition of civic culture is not based on a set of political and social attitudes, as suggested in Almond and Verba's seminal work (1963, 1989), but rather on a pragmatic approach where civic culture is shaped by social and communication practices. Today, a new civic culture is being moulded by the appropriation of modern electronic interactive devices and by the practices of networking and self-publishing. My argument is that a hybridisation occurs between the popular communication uses of the Internet and its civic uses. Civic culture covers different levels of engagement, from activism to occasional interest in public affairs. The digital civic culture is a dynamic phenomenon that reflects the multitude and diversity of social and political interactions on the web, although it is also innovative since it combines numerous textual, audio, and video resources. Internet practices reshape the expression of civic culture in a new techno-cultural format that infiltrates the public and political spheres.

This paper focuses on three sets of Internet practices that embody the transformation of civic culture: the reliance on the Internet for "free speech" journalism, the political blogosphere, and the digital engagement of ordinary citizens in public issues. The analysis is illustrated by empirical studies from France that are representative of similar trends occurring in many democratic countries.

The Revival of "Opinion Journalism"

The development of the Internet has challenged the role of media in the public space and brought a revolution in media organisations. Professional journalism is

undergoing a major change as the Internet leads to new modes of production and diffusion of news. Electronic mainstream media (newspapers, magazines, radio, and television) no longer consist of the mere diffusion of paper or broadcast news on the web as in the Internet's early days. Electronic news formats, including those for print media, have all been enriched with sound and video content, while media websites promote audience participation in forums, online surveys, comments, and blogs. Concurrently, amateur journalism is developing and challenging the professional practices and the ethics of journalism.

This world-wide phenomenon has a tremendous impact on professional practices. Multimedia journalism is highly demanding but, at the same time, the Internet has also brought a wind of liberalism and has expanded the forums for the expression of journalists. In France, this evolution is particularly meaningful because electronic media might foster the revival of what was called "opinion journalism" as "free speech," which was a tradition of the French press up to the Second World War (Albert 2008). Newspapers were then affiliated to strong political trends and journalists could often express their own opinions. In the last decades, professional norms have been enforced, notably emphasising the strict exposure of facts and the respect of a balanced viewpoint of contradictory opinions. French journalism has become more conventional and, if news media can still be identified by their orientation along the left to right wing political spectrum, they rarely take overt political stands except in the editors' columns, and journalists are told to comment on news in an "objective" manner and not to express their opinions. More recently, the growth of audiovisual media has led to a dramatisation of the news and to the emphasis on the emotional dimension of events, thereby leaving even less room for journalists to comment on events and expose viewpoints. Under these circumstances, the potential of the Internet offers an opportunity for re-opening the channel to the expression of journalists, although electronic journalism based on a dialogic pattern with the readers nonetheless differs from the "opinion journalism" of the past.

On the web, journalists benefit from more space for news and they can publish the full text of interviews, provide more in-depth background to events and comment on the news. Several French professional journalists run blogs on their media site and the concept of authorship remains strong in the journalistic blogosphere, as some well-known editorialists' blogs have become a reference quoted in different media. For less-known journalists, blogs are not subjected as much to control by the newsroom hierarchy than articles in conventional media. It is not rare that information that is supposed to be off the record is then published in reporters' blogs, which make political sources more and more reticent to deliver tips. Not only can journalists deliver more political-oriented comments, but they can also write in a more subjective manner. In this way, electronic formats of news are less formal; for instance, journalists may evoke the atmosphere of the events they cover and mention their modes of gathering news. Some journalists even adopt a more subjective and literary form and, in these cases, electronic journalism may then appear as another version of the new journalism of the sixties.

The web offers space to alleviate some constraints of media production and it makes journalists develop new professional practices as they are more and more encouraged to enter into a relationship with their audience: they are urged to

answer questions from their readers and to participate in the e-debates around current events on their media's website.

> *[A] link should be made with public journalism defended in the 80's and 90's. We can observe the same principles: the media in order to win back public confidence, must consult audiences to decide which subjects are important … to move from public journalism to citizen journalism a line had to be crossed: the boundary between professional and amateur was blurred by the direct participation of audiences in production of content. There is therefore a discontinuity, but within a coherent chain of events* (Ruellan 2007, 5).

The growth of the citizenry's expression on public matters has driven conventional media, including elite papers like *Le Monde*, to encourage readers' comments and to host blogs by amateur journalists on their websites. Several amateurs hope to reach fame in order to join the profession, but it is not the case of all of them. This overall evolution of the journalistic field highlights the interrelationship between professionalism and amateurship, although the line between professional journalists and amateurs remains clear today.

However, this "free speech" on media websites bears limits, as journalists should not infringe the policy orientation of the media and criticise the interests of the owners. As a consequence, some journalists have launched independent news websites. For instance, Edwy Plenel, a former editor-in-chief of the daily *Le Monde*, has created "mediapart.fr" an entirely electronic news organisation financed by subscriptions, while other well-known journalists have left the daily *Libération* to develop "Rue89. com" which is financed by advertising. This last news website relies on professional journalists and free-lance journalists (several of them being amateurs), which allows Rue89 to have an extended coverage over events all around the world. Le Post.fr is another popular news site that mixes professional and amateur production, the latter covering many reports about local events happening in different cities. For professional journalists, this new engagement in participatory web production is usually referred to as "civic journalism," which differs from "citizen journalism" practiced by amateurs, as Jay Rozen (2008) defines it: "When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism." Citizen journalists gather a group of pro-ams (professional-amateurs), who master the conventions of the profession, while many are just occasional contributors who have witnessed an event that they recorded with a camera or phone camera.

Amateur news websites which are fully based on user generated content have opened the journalistic field to the rank-and-file. In France, the multimedia site agoravox.fr counts over 8000 registered amateurs, 600 of them being active reporters. It appeals to ordinary citizens willing to send news about events they witness or other subjects of their interest. Topics are diversified and range from trivial news to general interest news related to public affairs. Amateurs do not have the time and the means to gather information on many events, though they occasionally disclose some scoops. All volunteer contributors have to sign a charter of ethical codes. However, the fairness and the accuracy of news are not always respected. In order to ensure that the reports written by amateur journalists conform to standards of ethics and trustworthiness, a team of moderators reviews all reports for accuracy and the risk of libel, as some reports are ultimately deemed unpublishable:

> *Beyond the verifications conducted by editors, AgoraVox uses a collective system to ascertain the reliability of information published online. This system is based on the commentaries of readers … as avert readers often conduct research to validate or invalidate an article … the informative contribution of an article must be evaluated in the context of the reactions that it raised.[1]*

Alternative journalism is deeply rooted in crowd sourcing and in the Internet's collaborative culture, and as such it plays a growing role in the mediated public sphere.

Nevertheless, conventional media organs are still considered the most reliable source of information about major events. For instance, during the 2004 presidential campaign in the United States, a survey done by the Pew Internet project showed that about half of the Internet users consulted the sites of the main media or of the web portals (Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan 2004, 6). The same trend was observed during the French presidential campaign of 2007 (Vedel and Cann 2008), as television was the first source of information for citizens, followed by the radio and the press, even though, towards the end of the campaign, the Internet was considered as the primary source of information by 21% of voters and almost reached the score of national dailies. On a regular basis, a concentration of readership can be observed around the leading media websites and portals, while this hierarchy is also triggered by the leading role of Internet search engines. Nevertheless, participatory news sites gather thousands of visitors, a significant number that demonstrates the audience's search for more diversified sources of information[2].

Yet, citizen journalism has led to the evolution of professional practices, as the communicative dimension of journalism based on dialogue with an audience, as well as the incorporation of comments, testimonials and blogs by ordinary users, have become as important as its core informative dimension of news coverage. "Citizen journalism appears to be a phenomenon coming along with the 'democratization' of the media public sphere. More than a competition or autonomy of self-publishing against journalism, it implies an evolution of journalism, at least on its fringes" (Tredan 2007, 117).

Accordingly, amateur journalism does not jeopardise the well-established place of mainstream news media, but rather challenges the profession by leading it to adapt to popular electronic communication technologies, and to adjust to the horizontal and interactive mode of communication prevailing on the Internet. The emergence of users' participation in what formerly was the closed world of the media, shows the fluidity of borders in cyberspace and enhances a democratisation process in the public media arena.

The Political Blogosphere

The world-wide phenomenon of political blogs is especially strong in France, which counts hundreds of them covering a wide range of public interests and formats. Active citizens who did not belong to political organisations were the first to use the Internet platform to protest that public and political matters should not be left to the elite. With the rapid growth of the Internet in France (55% of households were connected in October 2008[3]), the sphere of political blogs has rapidly expanded to other circles. Though some similarities exist in all types of blogs, distinctions can be drawn between the blogs developed by citizens, politicians, and organised activists.

"Citizen blogs" form a heterogeneous category that encompasses blogs created by ordinary citizens, journalists, and experts who all aspire to self-publish their opinions. Their commonality resides in their affirmation of a personal judgment about political events and public policies, which is opened to discussion and controversy. While pseudonyms are used, many contributors identify themselves by their personal names and do not address intimate matters, unlike many blogs on social networks. Furthermore, bloggers assume the responsibility for the expression of facts and personal opinions, which is a regular practice in the electronic public debate.

> *These citizens' declarations reflect the increasingly personal nature of political stands. Even though many of them are affiliated to political parties or are closed to them, the blog … is always claimed as a space for personal judgment. The bloggers promise to give their point of view independently from partisan instructions, vindicating their right as citizens to freely evaluate* (Cardon and Delaunay-Teterel 2006, 62).

The topics of French citizens' blogs are extremely diversified. Ecological issues around global warming and the French nuclear policies lead to much debate among well-known or unknown experts, as well as with rank-and-file citizens. Many citizen bloggers also discuss local politics and are involved in the social criticism of urban planning and local management of public issues (for instance, see the blog "monputeaux.com," written by a journalist who manages this blog separately from his profession). However, bloggers mostly comment on events and political news issues already addressed by the mass media. Since blogging is a time-consuming activity, many citizen blogs are not regularly active. Though reliable statistics are not available or even made possible due to the particularities of the blogging phenomenon, a major profile of bloggers has emerged. The majority of French citizens are males between 25 and 45 years old, who hold a university degree, and are either students, professionals in private firms, or employed by the media or in teaching positions (Vedel 2008). While bloggers with less education and professional qualifications can be found, the pre-eminence of highly educated individuals who are accustomed to the etiquette and rules of argumentation in political debate attests to the limitations of the digital public sphere.

French citizens' blogs have significantly different audiences. Only a small percentage of blogs regularly receive comments; the most famous blogs are produced by independent journalists and some engaged citizens who are very active and who have become famous. However, despite this niche, lesser-known bloggers are also involved in political debates that take place in smaller circles. Dominique Cardon (2008) stresses that political bloggers make efforts to network and build their audience by putting many links on their blogs and by using track backing of posts. Ranking is very important to confirm the popularity of blogs.

A common criticism of the citizen web is that political blog clusters attract Internet users who belong to the same political affiliation, and that it prevents debate with tenants of adversary opinions, which is important for the good functioning of a democracy. As such, the Internet would contribute to a balkanisation of the political web arena (Sunstein 2002). This tendency was first demonstrated in France by the University of Compiègne[4] in a study of the debate concerning the 2005 referendum on the European constitution, which revealed the existence of two separate com-

munities of bloggers in the "Yes" and "No" camps. While the conventional media all supported the creation of the European constitution, it is remarkable that 75% of all blogs on the issue opposed the constitution, which was interpreted as a sign of the expression of civil society, and as a hint that the referendum would fail, as was indeed the case. The cartography of blogs done by the same research team for the 2007 French presidential elections also showed that blogs of the same political orientation predominantly have links to each other's websites, although links towards the websites of political opponents are also created[5]. The selective exposure to congruent opinions with one's own personal views has long been established since the seminal work of "People's choice" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948). In the digital space, Internet users first bond with similar others, but they are also eager to debate controversial issues and to exchange with opponents, showing that the political e-debate is indeed opened to many controversies.

> The particular structure of citizens' declarations on blogs demonstrates that, unlike the closed nature of community organizations, they need to deploy themselves in a polyphonic space assuring a plurality of opinions, a controversial competition, and an internal structure of arguments … This competitive organization of judgments is at the root of a public debate and, as soon as they are questioned on their practices, the participants always declare themselves in quest of a debate with adverse viewpoints (Cardon and Delaunay-Teterel 2006, 65).

Serious content and courtesy are ways to get respect and build an audience, while bloggers who are rude and uncivil are often disregarded. However, the subjectivity of arguments remains a primary characteristic of citizen blogs, which have an informal style of expression, make use of humour, and denounce adverse political viewpoints. Dominique Cardon stresses that the "expressiveness" which is diffused in social networks also infiltrates French political blogs, though in a softer manner.

> The writing style of the blog does not hesitate to be colloquial and direct: it addresses others informally, and colors itself by affect and subjectivity. It can mingle trivial conversations, gossip, casual arguments, and conniving confidences in a feeling of liberty and informality that often makes this type of publication attractive (Cardon 2008, 54).

Citizen blogging shows the emergence of new forms of political expression that differ from the normative terms of public debate based on the exchange of rational arguments in the public sphere, as initially defined by Jürgen Habermas (1989).

French politicians have more recently entered the blogosphere and they naturally use proper style and language. Having a blog is part of a communication strategy aiming at not being excluded from the growing popularity of the digital space and appearing as modern actors of political life. Several politicians also show the will to engage in debate with other bloggers who are either favourable or opposed to their party, which explained the success of the blogs of former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, or of the presidential candidate François Bayrou. Politicians in their blogs assert that they speak in their own name and not that of their political party, and therefore express their personal feelings about public issues and adopt a less formal style to address the public. At a time of popular

defiance towards the political elite, they wish to highlight an image of themselves as citizens who are deeply concerned by public issues and who became engaged in politics for that reason. Politicians were very active in using the Internet to rally votes during the last presidential campaign of 2007. The website "*Désirs d'avenir*" of Ségolène Royal, which was independent from the Socialist Party, was a perfect example of the mobilisation of citizens through online debates and forums; it also hosted numerous citizen blogs. While many users did not otherwise frequently consult websites related to politics, they were still eager to share their opinions in what they perceived to be an important presidential race. The number of messages reached 48,000 on the Ségolène Royal site, and 33,168 on the Jeunes Populaires site supporting Nicolas Sarkozy; 38% of messages consisted of controversial arguments between participants (Desquinabo 2008, 114). Like in all forums, a minority of participants was regularly active on these websites, but the intense exchange of viewpoints among them showed the potential of online political discussion.

Network mobilisation is even more represented among the activists who are involved in social movements like the "anti-globalisation movement" or the French movements of "The Have Nots" ("*Les Sans*"): the homeless, those without rights, and the undocumented immigrants. These groups oppose the centralised and bureaucratic structure of political parties and they operate as network-based organisations, using the Internet as a tool for information, discussion of issues, and coordination of action. Some of their members tend to participate in activities sporadically, as many are just sympathisers who receive information on mailing lists and attend demonstrations only on certain occasions. Other members are real activists who regularly send information, while a few make comments based on their expertise (Granjon 2001). French protest networks have fully made use of all the web tools for connecting with others online, sharing content, and expanding their communities. If social movements altogether rally a minor fraction of the population, their activism reflects a new type of citizen engagement that is largely based on collaborative work leading to new forms of political and social action.

In sum, the large number of blogs reflects their increasing popularity for discussing political issues and evaluating public policies. Electronic links contribute to the fluid circulation of news and comments within and across clusters of individuals who participate in the public debate to varying degrees. Accessibility to participatory devices on the net has encouraged the expression of many ordinary citizens who could not publicise their opinions prior to the age of the Internet. However, original viewpoints are rare, and Thierry Vedel (2008) mentions that the spectrum of ideas remains restricted to the main trends in public opinion. But online forums have broadcasted individual opinions to a much greater degree than has ever existed before, leading many people, especially young adults, to enter for the fist time in the civic act of debating public issues.

Another characteristic of cybercitizen blogging is that it has created a virtual domain that interacts more and more with traditional media and conventional political circles. This permeability is mainly due to the active role of a small number of popular bloggers who can be seen as opinion leaders. While blogs can shed the spotlight on certain events and display original content, the topics of most online debates stem from issues currently addressed by the mass media. Finally, the new digital format of free and informal social interactions about political issues and

public affairs might be the most striking dimension of civic blogging. This new expression of political and social critique is also experienced by ordinary Internet users, who do not create blogs and are less active online, but who are nevertheless concerned with public matters.

The Evolving Forms of Vernacular Engagement

The vast majority of Internet users are not involved in the digital political sphere. Political blogs reach a relatively small audience in the population, as Thierry Vedel (2008) mentions by referring to a survey done by the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique (IFOP) based on a representative sample of adult Internet users (18 years old and above). If 44% of French Internet users declare consulting the Internet for political news, only 18% read political blogs, and this figure falls to 6% for regular readers. It is worthwhile noting that the socio-economic status of the readers does not show social inequalities: 20% of working class Internet users consult political blogs, which is the same percentage as for the upper class. Similarly, the level of education is not a discriminatory variable.

> It remains to be seen why the propensity to visit political blogs is very similar in all categories of the population. It is not the case for other political activities, which demonstrates that being an Internet user is a factor, albeit insufficient. Deepening the analysis, we notice that one of the variables that best explains visits to political blogs is the interest for politics, and that this variable has greater importance than all other socio-professional variables (Vedel 2008, 68).

This result confirms the findings of other surveys, which concluded that engagement in political issues only touches a rather small fragment of the population, as most people have a limited interest in public affairs.

If Internet users are more inclined to consult leisure sites and to engage in social conversation on the net, they acquire other interests that indicate exposure to public issues through the consultation of news on web sites, occasional participation in forums, and exchanges of satirical documents or viewpoints with their peers. According to a survey done by TNS-SOFRES[6] in November 2007, 37% of the French use the Internet to read news about local, national, or international events; according to another survey done by IPSOS, this rate reaches 74% among internet users[7]. Furthermore, forums on media web sites are a locus allowing the exchange of opinions about public issues. According to Azi Lev-On and Bernard Manin (2006, 206),

> Aside from the Internet, the spheres where one is exposed to adverse opinions are quite rarer, and those allowing an interactive discussion between people of opposed opinions are even rarer. It seems that the spheres most likely to meet these conditions are mass media and the workplace … as is demonstrated by two cases in particular: the sites and the portals of mass media and the non-political virtual communities.

The opportunity to meet Internet users of different social backgrounds and of diverse political opinions on media web sites breaks the fragmentation of political communities, which rally users sharing similar viewpoints, despite exchanges with communities of adverse opinions. The heterogeneity of the audience on media sites

widens the digital public debate, and free speech is facilitated by the equal status of participants, while the use of pseudonyms reduces the shyness that some may feel, especially women, in public discussions. However, this freedom may lead to virtual discussions which do not respect courtesy and political correctness, as was demonstrated in a study of the forum about the program "One cannot like everyone" on the TV channel France 3 (Vincent 2007). After a showbiz star had uttered, on a TV talk show, words that were perceived as anti-Semitic, the ensuing online debate attracted many viewers who engaged in very conflicting interactions along the pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian camp lines. Most forum users did not discuss matters rationally, but rather directed emotional statements, personal attacks, and racist insults at their opponents. This verbal violence expressed the community intolerance which arises among multi-ethnic groups in France's large urban areas. This example illustrates that sensitive issues may lead to a mere expression of prejudices in the electronic arena. Where less controversial and less acute issues are concerned, online forums can facilitate a more constructive dialogue and the understanding of others' arguments, although this does not necessarily raise the depth and quality of the debate, since most arguments remain quite subjective and personal. The abundance of emotional contributions in forums and other forms of online exchange leads to a cacophony of scattered individual talks that lack the civility and analytical argumentation required for a constructive public debate.

Another practice highlighting the web's civic culture can be seen in the success of satirical and parody sites, like the French amateur site bakchich.fr, making light of politicians and their policies through the use of sound and video multimedia. The derision of politicians is a form of social critique in democratic societies. Videos showing politicians in embarrassing situations, such as contradicting themselves or "putting their feet in their mouths," have become very popular, and are circulated widely on the web. Most of these documents are shot by ordinary citizens and put on Daily Motion or YouTube. The buzz effect makes these critical videos have a tremendous impact, as the best are also soon shown on TV. Furthermore, the availability of self-publishing tools on the Internet has fostered the leisurely creation of multimedia content mixing news agencies' reports, media images, sound, and photos with personal comments.

> The practices of mixing, subtitles, satire or commentary of the mass media culture reflect a culture of re-appropriation based on the technological arsenal of free downloading, of publication, sharing and video blogs. These practices are all related to the traditional media industries but are also autonomous to a certain degree (Allard 2007, 23).

The amateur remix practices combine all media resources and are based on many techniques (wikis, tags, ripping, feeding, mashups), thereby illustrating the "Convergence Culture" analyzed by Henry Jenkins (2006).

This digital literacy enhances innovative narrative formats about public matters that reformulate the expression of civic engagement. Such political oriented content is thus exchanged on social networks and links are sent to personal e-mail addresses. Resources on public issues found on the web are shared in the private networks of Internet contacts and may contribute to inter-personal discussions by e-mail or face-to-face. The 2008 US presidential campaign illustrates this growing phenomenon, as 35% of Americans have watched online political videos, 23% have

received emails about the campaign, while 10% have used email to contribute to the campaign, and 10% have used social networks like Facebook or Myspace to engage in political activity (Smith and Rainie 2008). The Internet becomes another way to occasionally entertain discussions on political matters among friends or family members, as public debate thereby expands to the private sphere, which remains, according to Wyatt, Katz and Kim (2000), a primary focal point of political exchange. Overall, it appears that ordinary citizens encounter content on political issues while pursuing their ordinary online activities, which leads them to enter the public debate in an opportunistic manner. The social uses of the Internet appear to be fostering new forms of civic culture based on the public expression of personal judgments online, which can lead to interpersonal discussions in the virtual or physical space.

A New Design of Civic Culture

This overview of web-based public spheres in France shows that the Internet has spread civic culture by promoting more bottom-up democratic processes. The Internet has provided tools for sharing information and forming personal opinions at a time when the attainment of higher levels of education by the population has encouraged individuals to exert their critical and reflexive capabilities. As Pierre Ronsavallon has pinpointed, this trend contributes to a growing feeling of individual competence to evaluate political issues and to a lessening of deference to authority. The increasing defiance against politicians and elites is reflected in many Internet users' information practices.

> [T]he prevalent role of the Internet is its spontaneous adaptation to functions of vigilance, denunciation and awareness… better yet, Internet is the manifest expression of these powers … the radical transformation of the notion of critique. It is the metaphor of what the Internet is accomplishing in the political order: a generalized forum to monitor and evaluate the world… it is in this capacity that the Internet can be properly considered as a political form (Ronsavallon 2006, 75).

As we have seen, the forms of involvement for the common good of res publica are very diverse and range from mere information practices to active engagement in political issues. One can say that there is a spectrum of concentric circles of digital civic culture expanding from activists, to experts, concerned citizens, and passive users. The web offers ordinary users a new link to the world that exposes them to news and ideas, while participatory devices lead the youth to gain interest in political issues on the social networking sites of the web 2.0, for instance. As Lewis Friedland, Thomas Hove, and Hernando Rojas posit in their critical contribution to the evolution of the Habermasian model of the public sphere: "The traditional institutions of civil society – networks of associations, informal associations, and the private spheres of the lifeworld – have become structured as networks of organisations, networked forms of social capital, and networked individualism (2006, 15). They further specify: "'Life on line' is more than a metaphor for those under 35 (and many over). It is a new form of life that influences core forms of intersubjective communication and sociation" (2006, 23).

Many argue that this explosion of networks leads to a balkanisation of public spheres that damages the democratic ideal of fostering debate of important and

controversial public issues with tenants of adverse viewpoints. Examples drawn from France show that this is only partly true, as homogeneous political communities also develop links to other groups. Another criticism is that personal viewpoints uttered in the digital public space are not rational arguments, but rather emotional reactions often based on self-interest, which thereby promote an "opinion democracy." Moreover, open access, free speech, and anonymity as is often illustrated by the net, lead to a degradation of ethics in group discussions, which some perceive as a hindrance to the advancement of democracy and good citizenry practices. In fact, digital public spheres are heterogeneous. Some networks are the locus of more thoughtful argumentation and analysis, such as activist communities aiming to protest social ills, as well as to foster deliberation and actual decision making. Nevertheless, most digital public spheres do not fit the normative principles of rational communication and social regulation of public debate. The citizen web is a pluralistic space with many voices that primarily seems to be a platform for information sharing and informal group or interpersonal discussions which develop new formats of public opinion building. As such, it does not mean that there is dissolution of the public sphere into the private sphere. The vernacular finds its voice in new digital literary forms of civic engagement based on the sharing of common experiences in the electronic arena.

Today, little is known about the way the new public spheres on the Internet interfere in the formation of public opinion at the national level. The question of the empowerment of citizens also remains. The digital public arena has certainly not replaced the traditional public sphere and issues are, above all, discussed in the mainstream media and in conventional political circles. But there is evidence of a growing inter-penetration of these spheres. Despite crowd sourcing, numerous issues discussed on the Internet first arise in conventional media; all the same, media and politicians have adopted the interactive communication modes of the Internet culture. So far, the digital and the traditional public spheres are permeable, as they complement each other through their interaction, thereby influencing the evolution of civic culture.

A common denominator in all public digital spheres is expression in the name of "the self," which relies on the rise of individualism as a common aspect of contemporary society and new modernity. This phenomenon has been abundantly covered by research. The uses of computer-mediated communication tools appears to be one more step to make publicity of individual experiences and viewpoints already prevailing in mass media, such as on talk shows. This phenomenon takes place in all of the digital public spheres, from citizen journalism to political blogging, web forums, and all interactive social exchange that we have examined. The part of the personal narrative and affective content varies widely, of course, depending on the civic platform. For instance, the modes of interaction in activist communities based on cooperation are less based on emotion than in media forums. However, in all cases, the Internet has contributed to the expression of the self about public matters.

The Internet's social uses encourage the blurring of the boundaries between public and private spheres, as digital technologies like user-generated content and connectivity facilitate the affirmation of one's singularity and authenticity in the virtual space. New patterns of civic expression appear based on the mixing of

private talk and public speech. But one of the main characteristics of the digital public space is the emergence of a new format of "semi personal-public expression," which combines all the multimedia resources of the web and aggregates texts, sound, and video content. Debate about public issues is no longer limited to words, but includes audiovisual texts. A hybridisation between the Internet's popular and civic uses takes place, thereby fostering a grass root social critique and a new political multimedia discourse. The collaborative culture of social networks infiltrates civic culture. As such, a new pattern of civic culture is being shaped by digital communicative practices that might become a core factor in societal change and in the evolution of democracy.

Notes:

1. http://agoravox.fr/article.php3?id_article=61

2. In October 2008, according to the audience rating institute Médiametrie (www.mediametrie.fr), the number of single users reached 4,809,000 for the website of the daily *Le Monde* (lemonde.fr), 169,000 for mediapart.fr, 423,000 for the satirical participatory site Bakchich.fr, 826,000 for rue89.com, and 1,707,000 for lepost.fr.

3. http://www.mediametrie.fr

4. Franck Ghitalla and Guilhem Fouetillou, see: http://www.utc.fr/rtgi/index.php?rubrique=1&sousrubrique=0&study=constitution

5. http://www.observatoire-presidentielle.fr

6. http://www.tns-sofres.com

7. http://www.ipsos.fr (enquête profiling 2008)

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