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The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation

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The theme of the Internet and the public sphere now has a permanent place on research agendas and in intellectual inquiry; it is entering the mainstream of political communication studies. The first part of this presentation briefly pulls together key elements in the public sphere perspective, underscoring three main analytic dimensions: the structural, the representational, and the interactional. Then the discussion addresses some central themes in the current difficulties facing democracy, refracted through the lens of the public sphere perspective. In particular, the destabilization of political communication systems is seen as a context for understanding the role of the Internet: It enters into, as well as contributes to, this destabilization. At the same time, the notion of destabilization can also embody a positive sense, pointing to dispersions of older patterns that may have outlived their utility. Further, the discussion takes up obvious positive consequences that follow from the Internet, for example that it extends and pluralizes the public sphere in a number of ways. Thereafter the focus moves on to the interactional dimension of the public sphere, specifically in regard to recent research on how deliberation proceeds in the online public sphere in the contemporary environment of political communication. Finally, the analytic category of deliberative democracy is critically examined; while useful, some of its rationalist biases, particularly in the context of extra-parliamentarian politics, limit its utility. It is suggested that the concept of civic cultures offers an alternative way to understand the significance of online political discussion.

Keywords deliberation, democracy, Internet, political communication, public sphere

For about a decade now, many researchers and other observers have been asking whether the Internet will have—or is already having—an impact on the public sphere and, if so, the attributes of this impact. Such discussions become unavoidably framed by the general international consensus, emerging since the early 1990s, that democracy has hit upon hard times; more specifically, the hope is often expressed that the Internet will somehow have a positive impact on democracy and help to alleviate its ills.

Yet, given the variations in democratic systems and cultures around the world, and given the pace of change—social, political, and technological—we should not expect to soon arrive at some simple, definitive answer to these questions. Indeed, thus far the evidence seems equivocal; moreover, the conclusions one might derive are inexorably tied to the assumptions one has about the character of democracy. Rather than yielding

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any fast answers, we should acknowledge that the theme of the Internet and the public sphere has a permanent place on research agendas and in intellectual inquiry for the foreseeable future. It is now entering the mainstream of concern for the study of political communication and taking its place alongside the established research on the traditional mass media. We may occasionally still ask if the traditional mass media enhance or hamper democracy, but most research on that theme today focuses its questions on more specific features within the overall complexity of the landscape. So too can we expect the research on Internet to evolve—not least in highlighting the increasing technical convergences between mass and interactive media.

In the first part of the presentation that follows, I briefly pull together key elements in the public sphere perspective. I underscore three main analytic dimensions: the structural, the representational, and the interactional. Then I address central themes in the current difficulties facing democracy, refracted through the lens of the public sphere perspective. In particular, the current destabilization of political communication systems must be seen as a context for understanding the Internet: It enters into, as well as contributes to, this destabilization. At the same time, the notion of destabilization can also embody a positive sense, pointing to dispersions of older patterns that may have outlived their utility and possibilities for reconfiguration. We can note, for example, the obvious positive consequences that the Internet extends and pluralizes the public sphere in a number of ways. It is this kind of tension that I would accentuate, rather than any cheery optimism, dour pessimism, or cavalier dismissal.

Thereafter I focus my attention on the interactional dimension of the public sphere. Specifically, I take up some of the recent research findings in how deliberation proceeds in the online public sphere in the current destabilized environment of political communication. I find the notion of deliberative democracy useful, though its rationalist biases, particularly in the context of extra-parliamentarian politics, do limit its utility. I suggest that what I call civic cultures offer an enhanced way to understand the significance of online political discussion.

Democracy's Communication Spaces: Three Dimensions

In schematic terms, a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates—ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion). These spaces, in which the mass media and now, more recently, the newer interactive media figure prominently, also serve to facilitate communicative links between citizens and the power holders of society. The key text here is, of course, Habermas's (1989). There are problems and ambiguities in his book, as many have pointed out (see, for example, the collection by Calhoun, 1992), yet, for many committed to a democratic society, the concept itself remains compelling, both empirically and normatively. Habermas himself has returned to the concept, revising and updating it (cf. Habermas, 1996). The term "public sphere" is most often used in the singular form, but sociological realism points to the plural. In large-scale, differentiated late modern societies, not least in the context of nation states permeated by globalization, we have to understand the public sphere as constituting many different spaces.

As a starting point, I find it helpful to conceptualize the public sphere as consisting of three constitutive dimensions: structures, representation, and interaction (I discussed this in more detail in Dahlgren, 1995). The structural dimension has to do with the formal institutional features. Most obviously, this includes media organizations, their

political economy, ownership, control, regulation, and issues of their financing, as well as the legal frameworks defining the freedoms of—and constraints on—communication. The structural dimension thus directs our attention to such classic democratic issues as freedom of speech, access, and the dynamic of inclusion/exclusion. Beyond the organization of the media themselves, the structural dimension also points to society's political institutions, which serve as a sort of "political ecology" for the media and set boundaries for the nature of the information and forms of expression that circulate. A society where democratic tendencies are weak is not going to give rise to healthy institutional structures for the public sphere, which in turn means that the representational dimension will be inadequate.

In regard to the Internet, the structural dimension directs our attention to the way in which the communicative spaces relevant for democracy are broadly configured. This has to do with such things as the manner in which cyber-geography is organized in terms of legal, social, economic, cultural, technical, and even Web-architectural features. Such factors have an impact on the ways in which the Net is accessible (or not) for civic use.

The representational dimension refers to the output of the media, the mass media as well as "minimedia" that target specific small groups via, for example, newsletters or campaign promotion materials. And given the increasing "massification" of communication on the Internet, representation becomes highly relevant for online contexts of the public sphere as well. In this dimension, one can raise all of the familiar questions and criteria about media output for political communication, including fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting, ideological tendencies, modes of address, and so forth.

In terms of the dimension of interaction, it may be useful to recall Habermas as well as other writers, such as Dewey (1954), who argue that a "public" should be conceptualized as something other than just a media audience. Publics, according to Habermas and Dewey, exist as discursive interactional processes; atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public. With the advent of the public opinion industry (cf. Splichal, 1999; Lewis, 2001), the focus on aggregate statistics of individual views became established. While such approaches do have their uses, it is imperative not to lose sight of the classic idea that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other. This is certainly the basic premise of those versions of democratic theory that see deliberation as fundamental.

Interaction actually consists of two aspects. First, it has to do with the citizens' encounters with the media—the communicative processes of making sense, interpreting, and using the output. The second aspect of interaction is that between citizens themselves, which can include anything from two-person conversations to large meetings. To point to the interaction among citizens—whether or not it is formalized as deliberation—is to take a step into the social contexts of everyday life. Interaction has its sites and spaces, its discursive practices, it psychocultural aspects; in this sense, the public sphere has a very fluid, sprawling quality, a view that correlates with what Alasuutari (1999) and others call the third generation of reception research on the mass media, where studies move beyond the actual sites of media reception and probe the circulation of meaning in broader micro-contexts of everyday life.

With the advent of the Net, civic interaction takes a major historical step by going online, and the sprawling character of the public sphere becomes all the more accentuated. We should also recognize that, empirically, the categories of representation and interaction on the Net often blur into each other. We tend to think in terms of either

"one to many" forms of communication, as typified by the mass media, or "one to one communication" that is paradigmatic of interaction. This neat distinction unravels on the Internet, where, for example, group communication can have attributes of both mass communication and interaction.

These three dimensions—the structural, the representational, and the interactional—provide an analytical starting point for examining the public sphere of any given society or analyzing the contribution of any given communication technology.

Destabilized Political Communication

That contemporary democracies are facing difficult times has become an established topic in both the public debate and the research literature, and the evidence translates readily into issues in regard to the public sphere's structures, representations, and modes of interaction. The discussions about the poor health of democracy intensified during the 1990s, at about the same time that the Internet was rapidly leading a media revolution. It did not take long for many observers to connect the two phenomena in an optimistic way. That new information and communication technologies are affecting all spheres of life in late modern society is of course not news, but there remains ambiguity as to the extent to which they are enhancing democracy (cf. Anderson & Cornfield, 2003; Jenkins & Thornburn, 2003). One's understanding—and perhaps even appreciation—of this ambiguity grows as one's insight into the complexity of democracy's difficulties deepens.

In a recent overview, Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) summarized the ways that the traditional systems of political communication in Western democracies are being destabilized by changes in late modern society (see also the collection by Bennett & Entman, 2001, for an extensive overview of this landscape). They took up a number of by now familiar themes:

- increased sociocultural heterogeneity and the impact that this has on the audiences/actors within political communication.
- the massive growth in media outlets and channels, along with changes in the formats of media output, the blurring and hybridization of genres, and the erosion of the distinction between journalism and nonjournalism.
- today's increased number of political advocates and "political mediators," including the massive growth in the professionalization of political communication, with experts, consultants, spin doctors, and so forth sometimes playing a more decisive role than journalists
- the changing geography of political communication as the significance of traditional national borders becomes weakened
- the cacophony that emerges with this media abundance and so many political actors and mediators
- the growing cynicism and disengagement among citizens

One can also add that deregulated, conglomerate media industries driven by market forces push increasingly to the margins all normative considerations (e.g., journalistic values) that do not enhance short-term profits (cf. Baker, 2002). The consequences of these transformations run deep, and the coherence of the political communication system comes into question. This destabilization encompasses several at times antithetical tendencies. On the negative side, we can list chaos, inefficiency, unpredictability, and so forth. Also, the centripetal forces of private capital are coalescing under the prevailing

neoliberal order, drawing power away from the formal political arena via a variety of mechanisms and thereby constricting and weakening democracy. On the positive side, we would certainly place such trends as the increase in political voices, new modes of political engagement, and definitions of what constitutes politics. Further, cultural heterogeneity may suggest dispersions and openings that can be developed for democratic gains. Destabilization can thus extend political communication through horizontal civic communication, as well as through vertical communication between citizens. Yet, again, it must be acknowledged that from a systems perspective, too much dispersion and polyvocality undercut political effectiveness and hamper governance.

To consider the role of the public sphere in general requires us to insert it into the force fields of this historical setting. The public sphere is an expression of and a contribution to these force fields, and this is all the more true as we consider its manifestations on the Net. It is there that we find the real "vanguard" of the public sphere, the domain where the most intense developments are taking place—what we might call the cyber transformation of the public sphere. Though we cannot be fully unequivocal here, we can still sketch some of the main vectors using the three dimensions I presented above. From the standpoint of structures, the Internet's political economy suggests that its development is quickly veering toward the intensified commercialization that characterizes the traditional media model (Patekis, 2000). The Internet has by now also become an integrated element in the dynamics of global capitalism (Schiller, 1999). Market logic, together with emerging legal frameworks and the impetus toward political restrictions, serves to constrain the extent and forms of representation for civic purposes in ways quite familiar from the mass media, diminishing its potential as a properly civic communicative space (Lessig, 1999, 2001).

Moreover, the use of the Net for political purposes is clearly minor compared with other purposes to which it is put. The kinds of interaction taking place can only to a small degree be considered manifestations of the public sphere; democratic deliberation is completely overshadowed by consumerism, entertainment, nonpolitical networking and chat, and so forth. Further, the communicative character of the political discussion does not always promote the civic ideal; much of it is isolated (and at times unpleasant), and its contributions to democratic will formation cannot always be assumed (Wilhelm, 2000).

At the same time, we note that the present architecture of the Net does still offer available space for many forms of civic initiatives. The criteria for access and use are such that the "digital divide" in the Western democracies has been diminishing, even if it would be unrealistic to assume that it will disappear (at the global level the prospects are quite remote, as is well known). The Internet is becoming integrated with the established system of political communication, yet it is also being used to challenge established power structures. Even the efforts of some more overtly authoritarian regimes around the world to curtail the democratic uses of the Net have not been fully successful, though inventories of the mechanisms of control are sobering. The progressive and subversive role of the Net should not be overestimated (Kalathil & Boas, 2003); "closed systems" can short-circuit the potential gains to be had by online political conversation (Fung, 2002). The sketchy evidence gives us some general impressions, but we obviously need a good deal more research before we can make specific claims about the political potential of the Net in different kinds of political contexts. At this stage, however, it does seem to be the case that, for those who have access and the political motivation, and who are living within open, democratic societies, the Internet offers very viable possibilities for civic interaction but clearly cannot promise a quick fix for democracy, a position that Blumler and Gurevitch (2001) affirmed in another recent article.

Multisector Online Public Spheres

If the vision of a singular, integrated public sphere has faded in the face of the social realities of late modern society, so has much of the normative impetus that may have previously seen this as an ideal. The goal of ushering all citizens into one unitary public sphere, with one specific set of communicative and cultural traditions, is usually rejected on the grounds of pluralism and difference. There must exist spaces in which citizens belonging to different groups and cultures, or speaking in registers or even languages, will find participation meaningful. Differences of all kinds, including political orientation and interests, gender, ethnicity, cultural capital, and geography, can warrant specialized communicative spaces. At some points, certain groups may require a separate space where they can work out internal issues and/or cultivate a collective identity. Not least we must take into account alternative or counter public spheres (cf. Fenton & Downey, 2003; Asen & Brouwer, 2001), where political currents oppositional to the dominant mainstream can find support and expression. These were first formulated in terms of class ("the proletarian public sphere"; see Negt & Kluge, 1993) as a direct response to Habermas's emphasis on the bourgeois public sphere. Later, Fraser (1992) further developed the idea, not least with feminist horizons.

It is here where the Internet most obviously makes a contribution to the public sphere. There are literally thousands of Web sites having to do with the political realm at the local, national, and global levels; some are partisan, most are not. We can find discussion groups, chat rooms, alternative journalism, civic organizations, NGOs, grass roots issue-advocacy sites (cf. Berman & Mulligan, 2003; Bennett, 2003b), and voter education sites (see Levine, 2003). One can see an expansion in terms of available communicative spaces for politics, as well as ideological breadth, compared to the mass media. Structurally, this pluralization not only extends but also disperses the relatively clustered public sphere of the mass media.

If the Internet facilitates an impressive communicative heterogeneity, the negative side of this development is of course fragmentation, with public spheres veering toward disparate islands of political communication, as Galston (2003) had argued. Here opens up yet another important research theme, one that must encompass an overarching systemic perspective. That various groups may feel they must first coalesce internally before they venture out into the larger public sphere is understandable; however, cyber ghettos threaten to undercut a shared public culture and the integrative societal function of the public sphere, and they may well even help foster intolerance where such communities have little contact with—or understanding of—one another. Fragmentation also derives simply from the mushrooming of advocacy groups and the array of issues available. While traditional online party politics and forms of e-government may serve as centripetal forces to such fragmentation, the trend is clearly in the direction of increasing dispersion.

The question of multi-public spheres glides readily into the issue of the links between the different spheres to the centers of decision making. The public sphere per se is no guarantee for democracy: There can be all kinds of political information and debate in circulation, but there must be structural connections—formalized institutional procedures—between these communicative spaces and the processes of decision making, as Sparks (2001) argued. There can obviously be no automatic, lock-step connection here, not without degeneration into a chaotic populism. Yet, there must be some semblance of impact, some indication that the political talk of citizens has consequences, or else disengagement and cynicism can set in—as is precisely what many observers

claim has been a pattern for a decade or so in the mainstream, mass mediated systems of political communication of the Western liberal democracies.

Today the most notable gap between communication in the public sphere and institutional structures for binding decisions is found in the global arena. Transnational forums, global networking, and opinion mobilization are very much evident on the Net, yet the mechanisms for transforming opinion at the global level into decisions and policies are highly limited, to say the least. There are simply few established mechanisms for democratically based and binding transnational decision making. While we might see the embryonic outlines of a global civil society (cf. Keane, 2003), its full realization is not on the horizon, even if the idea is a powerful and progressive element of the social imaginary.

In terms of the structural dimension, we can specify a number of different sectors of Net-based public spheres, including:

1. Versions of *e-government*, usually with a top-down character, where government representatives interact with citizens and where information about governmental administration and services is made available. While interaction may be relatively constricted, it can still at times serve as a sector of the public sphere. This sector is sometimes distinguished from *e-governance*, which emphasizes horizontal civic communication and input for government policy (Malina, 2003).

2. The *advocacy/activist domain*, where discussion is framed by organizations with generally shared perceptions, values, and goals—and geared for forms of political intervention. These include traditional parliamentarian politics, established corporate and other organized interest group politics (e.g., unions), and the new politics of social movements and other activists.

3. The vast array of diverse *civic forums* where views are exchanged among citizens and deliberation can take place. This is generally understood as the paradigmatic version of the public sphere on the Net, but it would be quite erroneous to neglect the others.

4. The prepolitical or *parapolitical domain*, which airs social and cultural topics having to do with common interests and/or collective identities. Here politics is not explicit but always remains a potential. Clearly, there is no absolute way in which the boundary between the nonpolitical and the parapolitical can be drawn, since it is always in part discursively negotiated and changeable.

5. The *journalism domain*, which includes everything from major news organizations that have gone online (e.g., newspapers and CNN) to Net-based news organizations (usually without much or any original reporting) such as Yahoo! News, alternative news organizations such as Indymedia and Mediachannel, as well as one-person weblog sites (also known as "bloggers"). Interestingly, the research literature has tended to focus mainly on deliberative interaction in terms of online public spheres and/or mass media journalism. We should not forget that the online journalism sector is a core element of the public sphere on the Internet.

This list can of course be made more elaborate; for example, one could divide civic forums into those which originate from journalistic initiatives and those with other origins. The point is simply to highlight a bit more specifically the sprawling character of the multisector online public sphere.

Two Perspectives

Two contending perspectives are emerging in regard to the role of the Internet in the public sphere. One view posits that while there have been some interesting changes in the way democracy works, on the whole, the import of the Internet is modest; the Net is not deemed yet to be a factor of transformation. Margolis and Resnick (2000, p. 14) concluded that "there is an extensive political life on the Net, but it is mostly an extension of political life off the Net." So while the major political actors may engage in online campaigning, lobbying, policy advocacy, organizing, and so forth, this perspective underscores that there does not seem to be any major political change in sight. The argument is that the Internet has not made much of a difference in the ideological political landscape, it has not helped mobilize more citizens to participate, nor has it altered the ways that politics gets done. Even the consequences of modest experiments to formally incorporate the Internet into the political system with "e-democracy" have not been overwhelming (cf. Clift, 2003). E-government efforts to incorporate citizens into discussions and policy formulations usually have a decisive top-down character (see Malina, 2003, for a discussion of the UK circumstances), with discursive constraints deriving from the elite control of the contexts.

This evidence cannot be lightly dismissed, but what should be emphasized is that this perspective is anchored in sets of assumptions that largely do not see beyond the formal political system and the traditional role of the media in that system. Indeed, much of the evidence is based on electoral politics in the U.S. (cf. the collections by Jenkins & Thornburn, 2003, and Anderson & Cornfield, 2003). While the problems of democracy are acknowledged, the view is that the solutions lie in revitalizing the traditional models of political participation and patterns of political communication.

Other scholars alternatively take as their point of departure the understanding that we are moving into a new, transitional era in which the certitudes of the past in regard to how democracy works have become problematic. Democracy is seen to be, precariously, at a new historical juncture. Few observers would dismiss the central importance of electoral politics: A more robust democracy will not emerge by blithely sidestepping traditional, formal structures and procedures. However, certitudes of the traditionalist view of a "return to normalcy" are challenged, not least by some of the kinds of developments that Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) mentioned (see above), such as increased sociocultural heterogeneity and the changing position of the nation state. In terms of the Internet, however, the argument is that they become particularly salient precisely in the domain of informal, extra-parliamentarian politics. There has been massive growth in what we can call advocacy or issue politics, often in the form of ongoing campaigns. Some of the advocates are large and powerful interest groups; others take the form of social movements or have a more grass roots character. Many represent versions of "new" politics (called "life politics" by Giddens, 1991, and "sub-politics" by Beck, 1997; Bennett, 2003b, spoke of "lifestyle" politics); such politics can materialize all over the social terrain in many different contexts.

This "infinite" view of politics is increasingly in confrontation with the more traditional "bounded" notion, to use the terms of Blumler and Gurevitch (2000). Common for most is that electoral politics is often sidestepped, signaling a growing bifurcation between traditional parties and single-issue advocacy groups. There is not that much research available yet on these new forms of engagement, but initial findings suggest a variety of different organizational forms, usually very loose and horizontal in character, with fluid memberships (cf. Bennett, 2003a; Cammaerts & van Audenhove, 2003). This

suggests a very different kind of organizational structure, as well as view of member-ship, relative to traditional parties.

It is often commented that the ostensible political apathy and disaffiliation from the established political system for many citizens may not necessarily signal a disinterest in politics per se. Rather, many citizens have refocused their political attention outside the parliamentary system, or they are in the process of redefining just what constitutes the political, often within the context of social movements. Among such groups, the bound-aries between politics, cultural values, identity processes, and local self-reliance mea-sures become fluid (Beck, 1997). Politics becomes not only an instrumental activity for achieving specific goals, but also an expressive activity, a way of asserting, within the public sphere, group values, ideals, and belonging. The evidence for such views makes good qualitative sense; however, it is almost impossible to get a quantitative grip on these developments. The fluid—and virtual—character of the organizations involved, the ease of joining and withdrawing, prevent us from getting a sense of the numbers involved. We can't know how many people any given Web site actually represents.

In the arena of new politics, the Internet becomes not only relevant but central: It is especially the capacity for the "horizontal communication" of civic interaction that is paramount. Both technologically and economically, access to the Net (and other new technologies, such as mobile phones) has helped facilitate the growth of large digital networks of activists. At present, it is in the tension-filled crevices deriving from the changes in the media industries, in sociocultural patterns, and in modes of political en-gagement that we can begin to glimpse new public sphere trends where the Internet clearly makes a difference. In their recent survey of the available research from political science, Graber et. al. (2002, pp. 3–4) noted:

> The literature on interest networks and global activism seems particularly rich in examples of how various uses of the Internet and the Web have transformed activism, political pressure, and public communication strategies. . . . Research on civic organizations and political mobilization is characterized by findings showing potentially large effects of new media and for the breadth of directly applicable theory.

Set in relation to the population as a whole, the numbers involved here may not seem overwhelming, but the embryonic patterns taking shape in the public sphere now may, with historical hindsight in the future, prove to have been quite significant.

Interaction: Limits of Deliberative Democracy

In the discussions about democracy and the public sphere in recent years, the theme of deliberative democracy is often aired. In the final sections of this presentation, I wish to address this topic by looking at some findings from recent research on online forums, as well as considering the concept itself. In particular, I see limitations in the notion of deliberative democracy as an analytic horizon for understanding the democratic impact of political discussion in online public spheres. While useful, my view is that this notion only takes us part of the way in analyzing and understanding political discussion on the Internet, especially if we focus on new, extra-parliamentarian politics. The rational bi-ases of the deliberative democracy perspective need to be complemented with what I call civic cultures.

Theories of democracy have generally posited that the communicative interaction

among citizens is of prime importance. Civic discussion is seen as constitutive of publics, which are both morally and functionally vital for democracy. The specific notion of deliberative democracy integrates elements of political theory with perspectives on communication (I developed these points in more detail in Dahlgren, 2002). Habermas and those working within his theoretical tradition have had a major impact in shaping the idea of deliberative democracy. The idea of deliberation points to the procedures of open discussion aimed at achieving rationally motivated consensus. Certainly dialogue is preferable to violence, and good dialogue is preferable to poor dialogue, but with the referent of the Habermasian ideal speech situation, demanding criteria are placed on the nature of political discussion. High standards are useful and necessary to define directions, even if we realize that reality often falls short of the ideals. There is a growing literature, largely normative and theoretic, addressing the concept of deliberative democracy (see, for example, Chambers & Costain, 2000; Elster, 1998; Sanders, 1997; Benhabib, S, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Fishkin, 1991; Dryzek, 1990).

Not surprisingly, recent research has shown that online discussions do not always follow the high ideals set for deliberative democracy. Speech is not always so rational, tolerance toward those who hold opposing views is at times wanting, and the forms of interaction are not always so civil (Wilhelm, 2000). Hagemann (2002) found in his analysis of political party discussion lists in the Netherlands that, the communicative rationality of the contributions was not impressive, in that they were often typified by the assertion of opinion without supporting arguments. Fung (2002) noticed that in the Hong Kong situation, journalists might sometimes debate under the false guise of ordinary citizens. Certainly political life offline can often be like that, so there is no particular reason to expect an ontological transformation merely because discussion shifts to cyberspace. Yet, it is important that current research is showing the particular character of some of these communicative shortcomings on the Net.

There are also sociological shortcomings in regard to deliberative democracy, the most basic being the familiar low level of participation, awareness of which in turn seems to further reduce the motivation to engage via the Net (Schultz, 2000; Heikkilä & Lehtonen, 2003). (It might be useful, however, to reflect more on the theoretic issue that Schultz (2000) raises: While we might bemoan low participation on the Internet, given that attention is a scarce resource and with increasing participation, there is less time for participants to listen to each other, what would be the consequences of very high participation be? The issue of "optimal" levels of participation in specific contexts, based on discursive feasibility, is in need of investigation.) In any case, there is also good news from this research. Tsaliki (2002) found a very satisfactory level of public deliberation in her comparative study of online forums in Greece, the Netherlands, and Britain. Also, the Internet seems to offer opportunities to participate for many people who otherwise find that there are too many taboos and too much discomfiture in talking about politics in their own face-to-face environments (Stromer-Galley, 2002).

In regard to such aspects as these, the vision of deliberative democracy provides a useful compass for envisioning what enhanced online public spheres could be. Yet, there are two basic conceptual difficulties in the discursive rationalism in Habermas's (1989) original position regarding the public sphere, and this is amplified by his later work on pragmatics and the ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1984, 1987). The first is by now familiar, and I will just mention it without further development: The rationalist bias tends to discount a wide array of communicative modes that can be of importance for democracy, including the affective, the poetic, the humorous, the ironic, and so forth. The second problem has received less attention. Basically, the argument is that adherence

to the perspective of deliberative democracy risks downplaying relations of power that are built into communicative situations. Kohn (2000, p. 409) approaches this issue by saying that "reasonableness is itself a social construction which usually benefits those already in power. . . . Democratic theory must consider how critical perspectives capable of challenging the dominant definition of rationality are generated, contested, and institutionalized." While she underscores the important role that deliberative democracy has, she makes the point that it tends to privilege the modes of communication among the elites. She argues that, historically, the expansion of the democratic character of society has been prompted by mobilization, the generation of collective identities, and concerted action, not by the attainment of deliberative consensus.

Arguing in a parallel, if a bit more abstract manner, Mouffe (1999) makes the case that the political is an irreducible dimension of all social relations and that conflict—she uses the term antagonism—is always present in the ever-shifting relations between various interests, between changing groupings of "us" and "them" in plural societies. The task is not to strive for consensus, which is ultimately temporary, or to eradicate power from democratic politics, but rather to formulate forms of power that are in keeping with democratic values and a democratic system. Instead of trying to remove passions from politics, replacing them with rational consensus, the aim should be to "mobilize those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs" (Mouffe, 1999, p. 756). While she does not have so much to say about the specifics of political discussion, she too sees the vision of Habermasian deliberative democracy suppressing the reality of power relations.

These critical reflections can be linked to the point noted above that the Internet has a more compelling role to play in the advocacy/activist sector of the online public sphere, in the context of new extra-parliamentarian politics. Political discussion within these organizations strives for internal consensus (or at least compromise), often to some degree of collective identity, and for political mobilization. Externally, however, the thrust of their political address toward power holders in the political or economic realm is not to attain consensus, but rather to affect on policy. Toward political society at large, they seek to stimulate public opinion. Those working in the alter-globalization movement, as well as those in, for instance, environmental, human rights, feminist, and peace organizations, are striving to make a political difference in settings that are characterized by highly unequal relations of power. While rational consensus may at times be a suitable strategy, deliberation is not always the best overall frame for describing or analyzing the political interaction that takes place.

Civic Cultures and Political Discussion

As a complementary way to analyze and understand political interaction in online public spheres, I propose that we treat political discussion not just in terms of its rational communicative qualities, but also as a form of practice integrated within more encompassing civic cultures. I have been developing the notion of civic culture (Dahlgren, 2000a, 2000b, 2003) as a way to conceptualize the factors that can enhance or impede political participation—the enactment of citizenship understood as forms of social agency. Space only permits a brief overview of this notion here, and then I will return to the question of political discussion, framing it as part of civic cultures.

The idea of civic culture takes as its starting point the notion of citizens as social agents, and it asks what the *cultural* factors are behind such agency (or its absence). Civic cultures point to both the conditions and the manifestations of such participation;

they are anchored in the mind-sets and symbolic milieu of everyday life. Civic cultures are potentially both strong and vulnerable: They help to promote the functioning of democracy, they can serve to empower or disempower citizens, yet like all domains of culture, they can easily be affected by political and economic power. A key assumption here is that a viable democracy must have an anchoring at the level of citizens' lived experiences, personal resources, and subjective dispositions. The notion of civic cultures grafts some fruitful elements from cultural theory onto some more familiar themes from political communication. This highlights that such dimensions as meaning, identity, and subjectivity are important elements of political communication.

We can point to public spheres, to their representations and possible forms of inter-action, yet questions remain about why people participate in them or not. The framework of civic cultures seeks to address these questions and provide empirical starting points for analysis. Given that the foundation of the civic culture frame is the citizen-agent, this frame is thus interested in the processes of becoming—how people develop into citizens, how they come to see themselves as members of and potential participants in societal devel-opment. Civic culture is an analytic construct that seeks to identify the possibilities of people acting in the role of citizens. This is a role which can have non- or pre-political aspects, but which may develop toward politics and indeed evolve into formalized politics. The key here is to underscore the processual and contextual dimension: The political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed.

The civic culture concept does not presuppose homogeneity among its citizens; it in fact assumes that there are many ways in which citizenship and democracy can be en-acted. It does, however, suggest the need for minimal shared commitments to the vision and procedures of democracy, which in turn entails a capacity to see beyond the imme-diate interests of one's own group. Needless to say, this is a challenging balance to maintain. However, different social and cultural groups can express civic culture in dif-ferent ways, theoretically enhancing democracy's possibilities. To facilitate the use of this materialist and constructionist concept, I treat it as comprising a number of dynami-cally interrelated parameters: values, affinity, knowledge, identities, and practices.

Values: It should be underscored that values must have their anchoring in everyday life; a political system will never achieve a democratic character if the world of the everyday reflects antidemocratic normative dispositions.

Affinity: This points to a minimal sense of commonality among citizens in heteroge-neous late modern societies, a sense that they belong to the same social and political entities, despite all other differences. They have to deal with each other to make their common entities work, whether at the level of neighborhood, nation state, or the global arena. This commonality is grounded in a realization among all groups of the mutual need to maintain democracy and adhere to its rules. Without this affinity, there can be no progress in communicating with adversaries, or even cooperation and networking among like-minded.

Knowledge: Referential cognizance of the world is indispensable for the life of democ-racy. A subset of knowledge is competencies and, in particular, communicative skills, which points to some degree of literacy and the relevance of education for democracy. Modes of knowledge are evolving, however, especially among the young, in keeping with cultural changes and new media technologies that can promote new modalities of thought and expression, new ways of knowing and forms of communicative competencies.

Identities: Citizenship is a formal status, with rights and obligations. However, it also has a subjective side: People must be able to see themselves as members and poten-tial participants with efficacy in social and political entities; this must be a part of people's

multidimensional identities. Citizenship is central to the issues of social belonging and social participation. Identities of membership are not just subjectively produced by individuals, but evolve in relation to social milieus and institutional mechanisms.

Practices: Democracy must be enacted in concrete, recurring practices—individual, group, and collective—relevant for diverse situations. Such practices help generate personal and social meaning to the ideals of democracy. They must have some element of the routine, of the taken for granted about them (e.g., elections), if they are to be a part of a civic culture, yet the potential for spontaneous interventions, one-off, novel forms of practice, needs to be kept alive. Civic cultures require many other practices, pertinent to many other circumstances in everyday life. Across time, practices become traditions, and experience becomes collective memory. Today's democracy needs to be able to refer to a past without being locked in it. New practices and traditions can and must evolve to ensure that democracy does not stagnate.

The most fundamental and most ubiquitous practice is precisely civic interaction, and discussion. Interaction is one of the dimensions of the public sphere, and as I noted, one can empirically investigate civic discussion by examining, for instance, its various discursive modes, its spatial and contextual sites and settings, and its social circumstances, both on- and offline.

From this vantage point, discussion in the context of the extra-parliamentarian new politics within the advocacy/activist domain of online public spheres can be seen in a different light. In the context of destabilized political communication systems, the discussions generated in these settings by these actors hold out the modest potential for making a contribution to the renewal, growth, and strengthening of civic cultures among many citizens who feel distanced from the arenas of formal party politics. This view must of course be nuanced. For example, there are a wide variety of political colors in this sector, and not all of them may be considered democratic and progressive. Also, we are no doubt talking about relatively small numbers of seriously engaged citizens. The general situation here can be compared with the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, where rather small but determined groups could have a significant impact on political agendas. One of the differences is that today the groups are generally much more sophisticated and effective, not least thanks to their access to the new media and their skills with them.

Discussion here may or may not always take the form of Habermasian deliberation, but what is more important is the reciprocal dynamics that it can generate, reinforcing the parameters of civic culture and the impact this may have on the larger political situation. The values and commitments espoused by these groups are largely very democratic, and can be seen as a counter to some of the very undemocratic values associated with the prevailing neo-liberal order. They are able to diffuse their knowledge through the Net to each other, and on occasion their efforts are picked up by journalists on the Net or in the traditional mass media and become disseminated further to wider publics (Bennett, 2003a). The affinities demonstrated by many of these groups foster a spirit of cooperation between various organizations and their loosely defined memberships, contributing to the formation of a broader counter political culture (see the Cammaerts and van Audenhove article, in this issue). Via the identities that are developed by participation, people are exploring new ways of being citizens and doing politics. Among the other notable practices are the sharing of information and experience, often transnationally, maintaining permanent campaigns to try to influence on public opinion on particular issues, and in some cases organizing political anti-consumption (i.e., boycotts), which can serve to concretely link the politically abstract with people's everyday lives.

While it is important to keep a clear perspective and not exaggerate the extent of the activities or their impact, it would also be foolish to underestimate what seems to be a major development in the contemporary history of Western democracy. The Internet is at the forefront of the evolving public sphere, and if the dispersion of public spheres generally is contributing to the already destabilized political communication system, specific counter public spheres on the Internet are also allowing engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics. Discussion here may take the form of deliberation, with various degrees of success, but what is more important in this context is that talk among citizens is the catalyst for the civic cultures that are fuelling this engagement. The jury is still out on what the verdict will be regarding the impact of these developments on the larger democratic systems—and I suspect that it will be out for quite some time—but in the meantime important developments in political communication are in motion.

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