6

The Internet as a New Platform for Expressing Opinions and as a New Public Sphere

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Until the advent of the World Wide Web (WWW) in the early 1990s, the Internet was an exclusive medium of communication, mostly used by scientists and computer experts. Plummeting prices for computer technology and user-friendly software have driven the WWW's rapid growth and broad, albeit uneven diffusion throughout Western societies. This has enabled its commercialization and turned the formerly esoteric medium into a mass communication medium: anybody with Internet access can now participate in it. Relatively low production costs and equally low publication barriers today allow almost anybody with basic computer skills to create Web content. By September 2006, the Internet had more than a billion users, and nearly 70 per cent of all North Americans and more than 50 per cent of the European Union's population were online.[1] At least in the developed countries, the Internet has changed from an early adopter technology to one used by the vast majority of the public.

The Internet has evolved into a mass medium that allows its users to overcome their traditional role as mere recipients and to become active participants in gathering, producing, and disseminating news. It is also a valuable tool for political action and for accessing large amounts of information. At the same time, the flood of available information and the mechanisms for dealing with it have contributed to further fragmentation of issues and audiences. This chapter shows how the Internet has changed the structures and the functions of the public sphere. The Web's participatory features are revitalizing public discourse and providing a new venue for public opinion even as corporate media increasingly dominate Internet content.

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EARLY ASPIRATIONS FOR THE INTERNET AS PUBLIC SPHERE

Unsurprisingly, in its early days the WWW was charged with euphoric expectations for a vibrant deliberative *cyberdemocracy*, the scope of which ranged from proposals for continual electronic plebiscites and oppositional public spheres to discourse-ethical concepts of online dialogues and Internet-based education (Ess, 1996). These expectations were frequently connected to libertarian "last frontier" myths, such as prospect of direct democracy in the electronic agora, the anarchic self-organization of the Internet, and a perfectly free and unregulated digital economy (Rheingold, 1993). The Internet was heralded as a promising means of creating a transnational global village, which would shake off both the boundaries of nations and the ballast of social welfare institutions, culminating directly in the formation of a perfectly free cyberstate. This libertarian cybersociety would secure the supply of information and goods independent of spatial, temporal, and personal limitations (Negroponte, 1995).

It quickly became clear, however, that even in the most developed countries a *digital divide* had emerged—the exclusion of poor, disadvantaged, or minority citizens from using this medium (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004). In reality, the global village is a gated community, where the costs of admission include those pertaining to the purchase price of the technology, the acquisition of the skills necessary to use it, and access to the network infrastructure. Moreover, as non-western societies joined this community, they have demonstrated impressive resistance against assimilating Western values and ideas, thus belying the naive deterministic assumption that introducing information technology automatically leads to a democratic polity. Even optimistic approaches that presuppose the Internet's inherent "democratizing powers" have had to tone down their euphoric assumptions in view of strict governmental control and censorship in many Arab and Southeast Asian countries (Ess, 2000).

And while the digital divide in developed countries may increasingly narrow (or rather, become indistinguishable from general social inequality and injustice),[2] the gap between rich countries of the western hemisphere and developing countries is still huge. According to *Internet World Stats*, only 15.7 per cent of the world population has access to the Internet. Half of them are in Europe and North America, where only 17.5 per cent of the world population lives.[3] A "quick fix" of this global digital divide is unlikely as long as the underlying structural issues, such as unequal distribution of wealth, health, and education, are not addressed—that is, as long as the global economy of "informational capitalism" favors "skill-biased technological change" that widens the gap between highly-paid skilled workers and the mass of unskilled laborers (Parayil, 2005). Therefore, regarding the Internet as a new platform for the formation of a public sphere always implies a certain level of exclusiveness. This, however, is not dissimilar to the propagation of the early bourgeois public sphere among elites, as described in Habermas' (1962/1989) seminal work on the public sphere.

POTENTIALS: CREATING A NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

The parallels between the Internet and the early public sphere are striking. In its early days, the WWW held out a promise of realizing the Habermasian utopia of unconstrained *public discourse*. The role of virtual communities as agents of a new public sphere has been widely discussed and criticized (Slevin, 2000). As the Web became more commercialized, however, the euphoria of the Internet community dissipated, and it has become clear that the Internet will not solve the political and social problems of modern societies. But this does not negate the Internet's potential role in providing new channels of communication and revitalizing public discourse (for an overview see Paracharissi, 2002).

Habermas' structural *discourse criteria*—openness to all themes, unlimited access, and the "unforced force of the better argument"—can be seen as counterfactual presuppositions shaping both the early public sphere of real communities and subsequently the public sphere of virtual communities. The correlation between these criteria and the Internet's structure might suggest that the Internet is an ideal means for *revitalizing* public discourse. However, the public sphere of the Internet may well be undergoing a structural transformation: the user friendliness and availability of the World Wide Web that made the Internet a mass medium also appear to have initiated the decline of this new virtual public sphere, in a manner similar to the transformation of the public sphere from the Enlightenment to late capitalism described by Habermas. Critics of the revitalization thesis argue that commercialization, governmental regulation, lack of attention, and a shift to mere entertainment are significantly shaping this transformation (Muhlberger, 2005). Structural limitations on discourse and engagement caused by the virtuality of the Internet and inadequate inclusiveness are seen as further hurdles for a true revitalization of the public sphere (Stegbauer, 2001).

This interpretation, however, fails to take into account that the Web has also provided a communicative space where professional and lay online journalists, as well as web-based interest groups and individuals, can broach and explore topics ignored by the mainstream media and sometimes thereby substantially influence *agenda setting* processes (Selnow, 1998, p. 187). This strongly resembles the "outside initiative model" of agenda setting as described by Habermas (1992/1996, p. 379ff.), and shows how new media can open up room for new forms of public discourse. In part, this has to do with the specific media characteristics of the Internet. In contrast to conventional mass media, the Internet permits true nonhierarchical multidirectional communication. Its low access and publication barriers enable its users to advance from mere mass media recipients to producers of and participants in digitally mediated mass communications. As a *hybrid medium*, the Internet combines interpersonal, group, and mass communication, and permits not only information distribution but also interaction among its users. It is thus an ideal medium for the interactive forms and needs of communication in the *lifeworld*, and can function as a sounding board for lifeworld problems—a central function of *autonomous public spheres* as described by Habermas (1992/1996, chap. 8). Such a revitalization of the public sphere by the Internet is not only feasible; it can actually be demonstrated empirically (Paracharissi, 2004). This revitalization occurs on three main levels of public communication on the Internet:[4]

Level 1: Virtual *episodic public encounters*, like those that take place in everyday life on the street or in bars, are found especially in chat rooms and other loose virtual communities where persons enjoy the protection of "intimate anonymity." Although these encounters do not translate automatically into political action (Jankovski & Van Selm, 2000), they provide the structural background for the emergence of an Internet-based public discourse at the second level.

Level 2: Internet-based forms of *public assembly* (Versammlungsöffentlichkeit) can be observed primarily in discussion forums, newsgroups, and mailing lists. They are instrumental in the creation and implementation of *counter-publics* (Gegenöffentlichkeiten) by protest movements, grassroots activists, and political groups (Rucht, 2004).

Level 3: Even *news media-based public communication* is undergoing a transformation due to the Internet. Conventional media are pressured to react constantly to the Internet because of its new role in agenda setting (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). News media also constitute a new form of mass communication by increasingly participating in the Internet with their own content, as shown by the Internet presence of nearly all print and broadcast media, as well as in the media-mix and cross-media productions of established media

conglomerates in the newly converging digital environment.

All in all, the Internet has created new information channels and opened new opportunities for communication and democratic participation. A multitude of autonomous public spheres can flourish through the unforced interplay of the Internet's three main levels of public communication. For example, citizen initiatives and grassroots groups use the Internet to communicate cheaply and to coordinate their activities effectively (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). Issue- and group-specific discussion forums foster the discursive formation of opinion and political will. Websites of a wide variety of organizations on every imaginable issue can be accessed, and provide a valuable and up-to-date information pool. Political activists produce their own Internet newspapers at low cost and thus contribute to the development of an alternative virtual public sphere.

Political mobilization and the coordination of transnational political action, such as demonstrations against nuclear power or globalization, are significantly simplified with the Web, and activist groups are intensively using the Internet in just this way (Pickerill, 2003). A defining event was certainly the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath, which not only generated the most traffic ever to news sites on the Internet, but also brought to researchers' attention "the importance of the Web as a significant component of the public sphere, enabling coordination, information-sharing, assistance, expression and advocacy in a time of crisis" (Rainie, Fox, & Madden, 2002, p. 25).

RISKS: FRAGMENTATION OF ISSUES AND AUDIENCES

The flip side of the Internet as a new public sphere, with its multiplicity of voices and its potential for virtually unlimited communication, is the danger of increasing social fragmentation and polarization. While the Internet has broken up the uniformity of the opinions published in the news media, it has at the same time created a digital obscurity due to the constant flow of huge masses of unfiltered information, which pose novel problems of selection for the user. Intelligent filtering tools, such as targeted content and personalization of news and other information, can help in coping with the digital information flood and users' limited cognitive and temporal resources of *attention*. Selnow (1998, p. 191) argues, however, that "the Internet's capacity to ultratarget runs the risk of fragmenting the population." And although audience fragmentation through the definition of target groups and special-interest issues is nothing new, the Internet, with its nearly infinite specialized websites, has taken this trend to a new extreme and enabled the fragmentation of issues into a myriad of narrow topics, each attracting the attention of tiny audience segments.

Users' selection of web-based information through "push" technologies, such as portals, personalized web pages, and automated updating (RSS feed), can easily result in *tunnel vision*, as Sunstein (2001) shows. Active citizens should expose themselves to ideas and issues that they would not have chosen in advance. Instead, personalization of news and self-imposed restriction to only familiar sources create a strong consonance of opinions, which may then lead to "*cybercascades*" of identically repeated and amplified opinions that, for example, foster and enflame hate groups. Similarly, Selnow (1998) maintains that the "information blind spot" of fragmented audiences ultimately leads to isolated, ideologically oriented groups that lack empathy and a common point of reference. This gives way to polarization and factionalism, demonization of opposing views, preference for partisan sources of information, and the acceptance of fringe ideologies and rumors (Plake, Jansen, & Schuhmacher, 2001, pp. 112–132).

Because of its low publication barrier, the Internet is indifferent to the actual content of communication and therefore acts as an amplifier for *any* sort of message. This not only further promotes the fragmentation of

issues, but also systematically gives fringe groups, conspiracy theorists, fanatics, and fundamentalists a disproportionately strong presence on the Internet (Fox, Anderson, & Rainie, 2005, pp. 30ff.). The digital proliferation of "memes"—self-replicating bits of cultural material, such as ideas, rumors, myths, and ideologies (Balkin, 2003)—takes advantage of the *self-referentiality* of the Internet, i.e. its hypertextual organization and its ubiquitous and ahistoric structure. Circular references and decontextualized information often supplant proper fact-checking and social and historical contextualization.

NEW FORMS OF JOURNALISM

Online journalism

The digital information flood and constraints on attention make it difficult to distinguish between high-quality and dubious information. The conventional media's mechanisms of quality control and issue selection cannot be seamlessly transferred to a hybrid medium characterized by interactivity, volatility, a decentralized network structure, and multidirectional communication. Yet the new multimedia obscurity presents a great opportunity for professional and lay online journalism. Plake *et al.* (2001, p. 89) maintain that the conventional news media should play a key role in filtering the Internet, because only they can provide highly selective and reliable relevance structures, such as salience and currency. These relevance structures orient the user and allow filtering of the otherwise unmanageable information flood. This filtering process is one of the most important functions of the public sphere (Habermas, 1992/1996, p. 360).

The conventional news media filter and homogenize information through the *gatekeeping function* of their journalists. This process usually results in media consonance and "mainstreaming," the reduction of issues to an amazingly small number of "hot topics" on the media agenda. Long before the Internet, this reductive process drew strong criticism and motivated the development of counterpublics, alternative press, and civic journalism (Rucht, 2004). However, the traditional role of the journalist as gatekeeper cannot be applied directly to the Internet. Some scholars see the Internet as threatening the traditional role of journalists as information providers and watchdogs (Tumber, 2001). The Internet has in fact undermined the information privilege of traditional journalism formerly secured through high production costs, scarcity of broadcast frequencies, and regulatory intervention.

Even so, traditional news media have all gone online and are among the most popular news providers on the Internet, thus retaining some of their gate-keeping function. Only one of the top six parent companies on the Internet is not a producer or provider of online news (eBay, ranked fifth). The other five are, in order of ranking, Microsoft, Yahoo!, Time Warner, Google, and News Corporation Online (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006). The remarkable breakthrough of Yahoo! and Google as non-journalistic entities into the top ranking news sites relies on two new Internet technologies: intelligent, usage-driven search algorithms and RSS feed ("Really Simple Syndication"), a unidirectional content subscription service that allows tracking of regularly changing web content, such as news sites or weblogs. Google and Yahoo! use these mechanisms to provide permanently updated news summaries from a large number of news media. While some researchers and journalists worry that these automated news feeds undermine journalism, others note that these services depend crucially on journalists' filtering and editing skills (Schroeder & Kralemann, 2005).

In addition to these conventional skills, online journalists must exploit the Internet's unique properties of multimediality, interactivity and hypertextuality (Deuze, 2002, p. 133). Online stories can be told in a more complex way: instead of using the formulaic inverted pyramid, online journalists must think laterally to expand a story beyond the linear narrative and include multimedia elements. They must also layer

information, i.e. dividing the story into small, well-organized hyperlinked portions that provide various degrees of background information and give the user choices about how deeply to go into the story (Stovall, 2004, chap. 4). Online journalism has become a serious competitor with conventional journalism, as shown by the emergence of professional-quality, independent online-only media (such as Salon.com in the U.S. or Netzeitung in Germany) and the dramatic growth in original online content produced by offline media. With the diffusion of broadband connections, true multimedia online journalism is possible, and broadcast media can now increasingly put their original audiovisual material online. At the same time, new ethical challenges arise due to increased time pressure (need for constant updates), the lack of accountability (understaffed online newsrooms), and the digitization of information (ease of plagiarism, fabrication, and falsification), all of which demonstrate the need for a systematic ethics of online journalism (Debatin, 2004).

Participatory journalism and the blogosphere

The Internet not only promotes professional mainstream journalism, it is also an ideal platform for participatory journalism, a bottom-up type of journalism in which citizens actively gather, prepare, disseminate, and comment on news (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Internet-based participatory journalism has dramatically changed the media landscape and also the way interest groups and grassroots initiatives interact and report (Reynolds, 2004).

The best-known form of audience-driven journalism is blogging. *Weblogs* (blogs) range from personal journals and political punditry to fairly objective criticism, such as Romenesko's renowned media criticism blog at Poynter.org. Most serious blogs track how often they are accessed and quoted by other bloggers. This contributes to a hierarchy, where well-established blogs function as opinion leaders and other blogs both feed on them and provide them with thematic input. As a whole, the *blogosphere* is a highly sensitive sounding board that anticipates media and public agendas, and has achieved a high level of influence on politicians and journalists as bloggers "weave together an elaborate network with agenda-setting power" (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). Blogs have played a decisive role in first-person accounts of 9/11, in political campaigns, in watching the watchdogs (media journalism), in war reporting, in political and celebrity scandals, and in pushing neglected issues into the mainstream media.[5] Blogging can thus reverse the usual agenda setting mechanisms (Delwiche, 2005): its audience-generated agenda is reviving and fulfilling the public sphere's roles as a sensor and a sentinel for lifeworld issues (Habermas 1992/1996, chap. 8). Reacting quickly to this, mainstream media have introduced their own blogs, functioning as new forms of op-ed columns and reader inclusion.

In addition to blogs, other Internet-based forms of communication, such as online discussion groups, email-newsletters (e.g. *moveon.org*), collaborative writing and publishing (e.g. Slashdot and the Wiki platform), peer-to-peer information sharing (such as IM and SMS), and RSS feeds help make grassroots journalism a feasible alternative to mainstream journalism. The most impressive and frequently cited example of powerful citizen journalism may be the Korean online newspaper *OhmyNews*. Based almost exclusively on reader contributions, it published stories from more than 15,000 different readers within its first four years (Reynolds, 2004, pp. 93, 125–129). Although similar projects have not succeeded on this scale, there are scores of examples of successful *hyperlocal citizen media* that focus on the needs and interests of their communities (Glaser, 2004). The Internet, with its constantly emerging technologies—most recently video blogging ("vlogging") or audio and video podcasts—will continue to provide an attractive and accessible platform for audience-driven journalism.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the Internet, one finds the *critical functions* of the public sphere—watchdog, informational, and opinion formation functions—essential to a thriving democracy. This has created new relations and a new distribution of power among the public, the media, and politicians. As the Internet is increasingly integrating conventional mass media while at the same time providing a platform for participatory journalism, the way that public opinion is formed and expressed is changing considerably. More research is needed on the Internet-based interactions among conventional media, grassroots media and the audience. For instance, classic models such as the *spiral of silence* that are solely based on the distinction between conventional mass media and the audience will need to be thoroughly reevaluated.

It is safe to say that the Internet has become an important platform for expressing opinions and for revitalizing the public sphere. Although it does foster audience and issue fragmentation, it has a great potential for promoting audience-driven public discourses. It thus opens up public discourse to the periphery, instead of focusing on the central forces of the media system and the political system. As sentinels and sensors, the virtual public spheres of the Internet do not have actual problem-solving capacities, but they can strongly influence the public agenda. Thus, they can force conventional media and the political system to recognize and address socio-political problems and under-represented issues. Future research will have to focus on this new and constantly evolving mechanism of agenda setting, as well as on the development of Internet-driven audience segmentation.

The low access and publishing barriers of the Internet have turned participatory journalism from an ideal to a vivid reality, albeit one demanding substantial involvement. The primary users of the Internet for political communication are usually educated and politically sophisticated, and political communication makes up only a small portion of overall Internet traffic. At the same time, online attention is increasingly "*colonized*" by large corporations, which has a marginalizing effect on critical voices (Dahlberg, 2005). Commercialization of content, the growing involvement of media conglomerates, and the increasing diffusion of broadband suggest that in the future, large portions of the Internet may be converted to a distribution mode in the hands of few major media corporations, with interactivity restricted largely to e-mail feedback. Though this is not likely to entirely roll back the participatory aspects of the Internet, it will significantly strengthen the role of the Web as a platform for conventional media content in a converging digital environment. Researchers in mass communication and public opinion will have to keep a close eye on how the Internet continues to change the media landscape—and how this changes the formation and expression of public opinion.

NOTES

1 Figures from the *Internet World Stats* website at http://www.internetworldstats.com/.

2 See DiMaggio *et al.* (2004) and the six online penetration studies of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) at http://www.ntia.doc.gov/.

3 Figures as of September 2006, from the *Internet World Stats* website at http://www.internetworldstats.com/.

4 These three main levels of public communication are derived from Habermas (1992/1996, chap. 8).

5 For an overview on various aspects of blogging see the special issue articles in Nieman Reports (2003). According to the blog tracker *technorati.com*, 48.6 million blogs existed as of July 2006.

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