

Two Faces of the Public Sphere.

The Significance of Internet Communication in Public Deliberation

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Abstract

The differentiation of topics, styles and actors in the current public sphere is an astonishing phenomenon, which changes our views on it in relation to democracy. Particularly personal media based on the Internet takes actively part in the internal differentiation of the public sphere, fulfilling other functions than face-to-face interaction and the mass media. Inner divisions of labour in the public sphere emerge, which forces us to reconsider conventional understandings of the political public sphere vis-à-vis political deliberation. In the paper, I address this new complexity of public discourse and revised views on its functions – specifically with regards to the current ‘legitimacy deficit’ in the EU.

1. Introduction

Habermas’s main question in his keynote address to the media researchers at the ICA conference in Dresden in June 20th 2006 was whether deliberation in the public sphere actually does introduce an epistemic dimension to political decision-making, ie. whether the public sphere can bring new insights and solutions to politics today. Habermas has previously given arguments for the potential of the public sphere, but what about the current condition in western democracies? The volume of political communication in the public sphere has expanded dramatically, but it is at the same time dominated by non-deliberative communication. Habermas argues that there is a lack of an egalitarian face-to-face interaction and reciprocity between speakers and addressees in a shared practice of collective decision-making (Habermas 2006,414). More importantly, the very dynamics of mass communication, Habermas (2006, 414) claims, are driven by the power of the self-regulated system of the mass media to select, and shape (dramatise, simplify, polarise) information. Quite interesting, he presents something of a media-centric argument, suggesting that the increasing influence of radio and TV, fosters increasing ignorance,

apathy and low-level trust in politics: ‘The data I have mentioned suggest that the very *mode* of mediated communication contributes independently to a diffuse alienation of citizens from politics.’ (Habermas 2006, 424) But the strategic use of political power to influence and trigger agendas and issues is according to Habermas also an increasing problem. In other words, in the public sphere of communicative action, strategic action has continued to intervene.

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

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

One interpretation of this is that Habermas is simply not sufficiently knowledgeable about the myriads of discourses on the Internet about delimited issues as well as questions of national concern to transform his model in accordance with the current media situation. One could get the impression that he considers the mediated dimension of the public sphere as mainly composed by the press, increasingly challenged by radio and TV. But this would certainly be to underestimate Habermas as an observer of contemporary changes. Rather, I believe that his passing and relatively dismissive judgement on the Internet derives from his prime interest in the public sphere seen from the point of view of political democracy, not from the point of view of the media. Habermas is simply more interested in political deliberation than in democratic potentials in media change.

Deliberative democracy is built upon the three principles: the protection and private autonomy of citizens, free democratic participation of citizens in the political community, and the functional independence of a public sphere that operate as an intermediary system between state and society. Unlike the liberal tradition which gives more weight to private rights, and the republican tradition which stresses political participation, the deliberative alternative stresses the legitimating formation of considered public opinions and problem-solving. The deliberative model asks how knowledge can emerge from public discourse and negotiation. Deliberation is a form of communication, which is open, public and oriented to arguments, justifications and reasons. Over time this can be seen as legitimating rational opinion formation.

The notion of the public sphere is the key. Habermas argues that the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation only if a self-regulating media system gains independence from the social environment, and if anonymous audiences grant feed-back between an informed elite and a responsive civil society. Civil society can be understood as the ensemble of self-organised and coordinated activity in organisations, associations, social movements and interest groups where members freely cooperate on equal grounds to publicly pursue aims of common or universal interest. The communicational dimension of the civil society can be viewed as a dimension of the public sphere.

Habermas is concerned with the deliberative legitimation of politics in differentiated and complex societies, which requires some kind of public focusing and ordering of issues and solutions. In Habermas' examination, this leads to a focus on a) *national*, rather than on

local and regional or global public spaces, b) on the *political* public sphere at the expense of the literary/cultural public sphere, and c) on the dimensions of the political public sphere that *directly* influence legitimate, political decision-making by providing thematic focus and consolidation.

So how can we advance our thinking about the relationship between deliberative democracy and the Internet? If the research problem is not deliberative legitimation of politics *per se*, but rather the significance of Internet communication in the public sphere, we need to a) address local and global public spheres in addition to the national, b) address the literary/cultural public sphere in addition to the political, and c) address the communication that has indirect influence on the political system in addition the communication with direct influence. To advance our thinking about the relationship between the Internet and the public sphere in general, detailed examinations of distinct fora on the Internet have merely illustrative value. The Internet surely provides communicative conventions as diverse as in the worlds of the mass media and face-to-face interaction. Also, I consider the Internet-based, mass media-based and face-to-face interaction as three main dimensions of a highly differentiated public sphere. For this reason it makes little sense to talk about the Internet as a public sphere of itself. Rather we should ask what normative energies and burdens the Internet brings to the public sphere. How does it structurally transform the public sphere, not least on a European scale?

My strategy in the following therefore, is to examine the functions of our current amorphous and complex public sphere, in order to see transformations followed by the widespread use of the Internet and personal media. The arguments I would like to develop, are as follows: 1) The use of the Internet contributes to the diversity of views and broadening participation, but complicates observation of the political public sphere from the point of view of politics and the state. In this, the Internet seems to reverse the effect of commercial mass media. 2) The public sphere should be seen as consisting of two dimensions or ‘faces’, each oriented towards different solutions and problems. 3) An updated understanding of the public sphere would benefit from a network-analytic approach. In a network-analytic perspective a European public sphere exists and can be adequately described.

2. Differentiation of the public sphere

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

These features are often seen as contra-productive and disadvantageous for an active, participatory public sphere. However, they fill a very important function of the public sphere, the function of *focus*, in terms of both content and form. The standardised, narrowed and centralised agenda of the mass media enables the political system to mirror their own deliberation in the public sphere and become visible for the citizens. The problem with the mass mediated platform is not the mass media structure itself, but that this structure have only been complemented by place-bound, face-to-face interaction. I am not here referring to the concentration on the international media market (which constitutes a democratic problem indeed) but the inherent structure of mass media and mass communication. While it inhibits participation and diversity from below, it allows for an organised harmonisation and convergence of meaning as an interface of the public sphere for the society to observe. The amorphous public can thus be identified and referred to, and mobilised as platform for democratic politics. We should however, remember that the vast *numerical* majority of mass media in Europe (newspapers, weeklies, magazines, journals, local radio, and tv stations etc.) have modest circulation and audiences, but which makes them more sensitive to the *diversity* of topics, people and events of interest.

The Internet-based structures of communication, whether we look at e-mail, mailing lists, wikis, blogs, chat groups or network sites like Facebook, clearly represent deviations from the mass media model. In very different ways, they all base their existence on information and communication from their users, including a wide variety of participants, events, views and topics. Not surprisingly, media theory and Internet-research turned rather quickly to Habermas' study of the early European bourgeois public sphere and to theories of deliberation. Theories of deliberation addressed precisely what the Internet seemed to offer: Possibilities for formation of productive enlightening and public opinion on a much broader

scale than previously in history. This provided formation of public opinion as a medium between citizen preferences and political institutions. Several studies have demonstrated that digital forums of various sorts have the capacity to create engagement, and critical discussion about important issues of common public interest (Coleman & Gøtze 2001). Several studies have examined the ability of the Internet to carry public deliberation (for an overview see Dahlberg 2001). The conclusion is that fora on the Internet contribute to the critical public sphere, whether locally, nationally or internationally by reproducing normative conditions for public opinion formation.

Particularly the concept of 'social capital' refers to this connection between information and membership in online and offline social networks. Social capital is the ability to benefit from a membership in social networks and groups (Coleman 1988, Adam & Ronkevik 2003, Portes 1998). It is a recourse that connects individuals and allow for the mobilisation of certain common social objectives (Räsänen & Kuovo 2007, 222). A number of studies conclude that the Internet increases the number of social contacts and relationships because it generally increases the opportunities for interaction (Dimaggio et al. 2001, Wellman et. al. 2001, Uslaner 2004, Cummings & Craut 2002). It is also argued that Internet activity does not take place at the expense of offline interaction but supplements it (Franzen 2000, Robinson et. al. 2002, Gershuny 2003, Lievrouw, 2001, Shah et. al. 2001). For instance several studies of social capital and the use of Internet indicates that Internet use increases and supplements civic involvement (Wellman et. al. 2001). The Internet is a source for social capital in that it educates in further Internet use and management of digital hardware and software, and helps to connect individuals or to intensify existing social networks, particularly among younger people. Räsänen & Kuovo (2007) found that frequent Internet use and sociability are significantly connected in several countries in Europe. It even appears that Internet use is a more significant predictor of civic engagement than interpersonal involvement, gender and age. The causal direction of the relationship is difficult to decide. Voluntary and political work in NGOs and social movements now requires the use of the Internet, and associations in music, sports, arts, etc generally use the Internet or communicate internally and to announce their existence on the web.

However, Habermas is not entirely off the mark in insisting that the Internet play a secondary role (if not as marginal as Habermas seem to think) vis-à-vis formal politics. In order for a blogger or a group on the Internet to have political impact, their message must in

almost all cases be picked up by the mass media. And before we go on to modify the model of the public sphere according to the media development of the last decade or two, we should also keep in mind the naïve wave of cyber-democratic enthusiasm that tend to confuse political and technological realities (Benkler 2006). What is technologically possible may not be socially favourable. For instance, even if hypertext makes it technically possible to connect issues, publics, arguments, and facts, research shows that this possibility is often not applied in practice. And although it is perfectly possible to engage in civil debates on discussion forums, such forums often report on problems of uncivil communication in various forms. What seemed to worry Habermas is precisely that communication evades responsible editing mechanisms. Substantial parts of Internet interaction seems to amount to hasty, unfocused and inconsistent chat because of the expansion and democratisation of access to un-edited discussion that the Internet offers.

First, what Habermas calls ‘issue publics’ overlap with publics with interest in social and political change, which is pursued through other media. Membership in various publics, either with respect to themes or media (magazine readers, human movements activists, bloggers, tv-viewers, etc.) is not mutually exclusive. Second, the diversity of Internet communication (measured as scope of issues and viewpoints, degrees of civility) is larger than in the mass media, thus representing the worst and the best from the point of view of rational discourse. To control the explosive growth of information on the net, socio-technological tools are developed to search, filter and target information on the net (tags, filters, blog-lists, RSS-feeds, search-engines, meta-sites, tracking systems, etc).

Third, with the Internet, the collective, main-stream nature of the hitherto mass mediated public sphere, become more in tune with individualisation in modern society. With interaction rather than reception, subjective preferences and viewpoints are more easily articulated and linked to others, reproducing webs of intersubjectivity. The autonomy and self-realisation typically associated with the modern individual ‘fits’ better with the public sphere partly reproduced through what I call personal media. Personal media represents the modern individual’s personal tool in that they allow not only for social interaction with friends and relatives, but also for critical judgement vis-a-vis others in weak-tie associations that are linked together with new and old media.

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

1. Social Movement activity (web, blogs, email, wikis)
2. Discussion and chats among citizens (blogs, chatrooms, e-mailing lists)
3. Citizen access to MPs and public authorities (web, e-mail, blogs)
4. Online 'participatory' journalism (web, email, sms, mms, blogs)
5. Connections and weak tie networks (network sites like Facebook, Myspace etc.)
6. User-generated content in broadcasting (tv, radio, web, sms, blogs)

In contrast to the public sphere once entirely dominated by public encounters and the mass media, the Internet and personal media propels a more differentiated public sphere, both in terms of topics, styles, as well as with respect to the number and variety of participants. The current public sphere are more niche-oriented, both because of a more diverse media-scape, and because of a more ethnically and culturally pluralistic society in general. First, the diversity of *topics* is broader than in the mass media; It has been argued that the nature of topics in the more recent representational dimension of the public sphere are more particular, private and local than the mass media, in spite of the global reach of the net (Becker & Wehner 2001, 74). However, it is also the case that global or international issues are constantly discussed, such as the conflicts in Iraq, if in individual and local ways. Second, the span of *styles* and *genres* (informality, impulsivity, rhetoric styles, politeness, civility etc) far exceeds the mass media. Third, the number and diversity of *voices* is considerable compared to the mass mediated public sphere. (children, youth, uneducated, etc). Individuals may change between the roles of general relatively passive citizen and more active and specialised communicator.

The differentiation of topics, styles and participants is truly an astonishing phenomenon, which transforms the public sphere and how we view it in relation to democracy and culture. In all three differentiation trends, the driving force is the personalisation of media on the Internet, enabling the individual to voice opinion directly to public power, to participate in campaigns, and social movements, and to exchange opinions on online forums in her own

ways and language, drawing upon personal experiences, knowledge, engagements, values and judgements. Because the threshold for speaking up on the Internet decreases, more people do, and increasing participation lower the threshold even further. And yet because the threshold is still much higher than simply watching the television news, more involvement and interest accompany Internet participation. One tends to appear more as one interested in particular themes and interests, than simply being a citizen among millions (Becker & Wehner 2001, 74). Whereas the mass media produce homogeneity, the multitude of Internet fora seems to produce a heterogeneity that has, I might add, difficulties in controlling itself communicatively.

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

As a modern response to a dynamic democracy, the digital dimension of the public sphere offers less guidance for politics, but more possibilities for expression. Compared to the journalism of mass media, on-line journalism tends to be more compartmentalised and based upon self-selection and personalisation. The criteria of selection are to be composed by the individual. Rather than offering carefully edited information, it offers a differentiated space for interaction and user-composed information, that tend to be rather specialised, and also closer to personal opinion, rumour and not confirmed information. Whereas the mass media works toward conformity and common denominators, the Internet is more oriented towards particular interests. It is located 'between' the mass media public, and face-to-face interaction, as in public meetings, rallies, etc. (Becker & Wehner 2001, 75).

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

Still, the vast majority of these forums and their participants, fulfil some basic requirements of a public sphere: they are (just like the mass media and locale meetings), committed to improve social conditions one way or another, and also to free speech and dialogue. They are also committed to make themselves understood and to understand others in an open space of an assumed indefinite audience, if not for other reason than to make rhetorical shortcuts or reach compromises. Some sort of communicative or cooperative action with embedded validity-claims, may seem to be in action.

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

are innumerable. The lack of intermediaries on the Internet is less of a problem than it may seem, precisely because it is so integrated with face-to-face, and mass mediated interaction.

3. The public sphere as communication networks

A network-like description of the public sphere suites the pre-Internet era of the public sphere as much as the current situation. However, with Internet access on nearly all computers the development has accelerated in different directions. The Internet has intensified the circulation in time and space. It has radically lowered the barrier for interaction of all forms, by combining written and audio-visual speed and scale of the mass media, with the interpersonal dialogue of face-to-face interaction. Since the emergence of e-mail in 1972, the Internet has come up with software that has presented a wide range of communication structures. The distinction in mass media between producer and audience is suspended, as is the case with the distinction in face-to-face interaction between physical place and social space. This creates the possibility for a wide range of recombined communication situations. What seems to emerge is a more network-like, distributive dimension of the public sphere (Rasmussen 2003, Benkler 2003). This carries with it a greater democratic potential in terms of participation, but with some democratic deficit in terms of focus and reflexivity. This however, is about to change, or ‘normalise’ itself. The web may structure the organisations that apply it, but it also becomes heavily influenced by them. The web in our context is not technology, but a possibility for communication that quite naturally takes shape from its institutional contexts.

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

mobilisation constitute, in an abstract sense, a complex sphere of public communication and about matters relevant for all.

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

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

it includes the imperative of both diversity and focus of communication, and 5) includes both the chat-like and deliberative character of public communication.

4. Two faces of the public sphere

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

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

includes will-formation of the political stem in the public sphere. Also the EMEDIATE project made a distinction between a hard public sphere as the dimension of a political public sphere that are directly relevant for a democratic society, and a softer, non-institutional public sphere (Schulz-Forberg, 2005).

These ideas are of interest here because they will indicate an internal functional duality within the public sphere. They all distinguish analytically between a ‘thick’ and a ‘thin’ dimension of the public sphere. The thick dimension includes the vast universe of cultural, expressive, pseudo-private statements, whereas the thin dimension includes deliberation in a stricter sense. The question then is how the mass media and the personal media of the Internet position themselves vis-à-vis these distinctions. Is there a pattern – and how does it develop? Let me first make clear that we should not consider the public sphere in plural. I do not distinguish between two public spheres *per se* but rather between two main dimensions – or faces – of a diverging and converging public sphere drawing upon different groups of participants, forms of statements, issues and media. It is not a satisfactory solution to talk about public spheres in plural, since much of the political significance lies in the interconnection of interaction into one integrated public opinion. Deliberation has a political purpose in that it must be readable by the political system. Difference and tolerance of private and public perspectives and life forms, in short, must be supplemented by convergence of public opinion.

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

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

How the Internet is involved these two dimensions is an empirical question, and empirical research more than indicate that the Internet serves the representational dimension more than the presentational. Increasingly, the political system examines the possibilities of the Internet as a forum for political will formation and deliberation, but such attempts are risky. Due to the proliferation of personal media among individuals, they are used mostly as channels for citizen activity in the civil sphere and everyday life. The heterogeneity of Internet communication stands in a dynamic relationship to the homogeneity of the main stream mass media, through a wide range of mechanisms of selecting, filtering, styling, formalisation, restructuring etc. If such integration occurs, reciprocity emerges between the presentational and representational dimensions. More precisely, in such a dialectic process, the mass media present mainstream issues (and mainstream positions to them) to the broader audience, and to central powers of politics, but also economics, courts, sports, entertainment, social movements, etc. On the other hand, substantial information and communication on the Internet are produced and consumed by culturally, demographically and politically segments of the public.

A dynamic relationship between its presentational and representational faces implies that the public sphere serves its purpose as a political and cultural institution. Both dimensions serves basic functions to a democracy which depends on, and appreciates both efficiency and diversity, both a strong public opinion, which motivate politics on main concerns with the help of journalistic and entertainment techniques, and pluralistic and direct dialog among

its citizens. Diversity is increasingly important, not least because the mass media in most countries tend to be subject to concentration in large-scale media cartels. And conversely, a focused and mainstreamed public sphere compensate for the complexity, extremity and intransparency of partial, issue-oriented, public contexts.

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

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

In order to understand the interrelationships between the two faces of the public sphere as well as their connection to political democracy, let me briefly recall Habermas' two forms of discourse – the moral and ethical-existential (Habermas 1996). The aim of moral discourse is to find an impartial platform for sorting out collective courses of action on collective matters. The question of moral discourse is what we (in this society) should do. On the other hand, the aim of ethical-existential discourse is not concerned about how we should solve common problems through rational procedures, but rather how the individual should organise her life according to values and norms. The question is: What is the good life for me – who do I (or a cultural/ethnic 'we') want to be. This duality of discourse has been

criticised for being too sharp, and for devaluing cultural values involved in moral discourse. In reality, it is argued, my private world of values and norms and the public world of problem-solving are to a large extent intertwined, we always draw on the one world to deal with the other. Furthermore, Habermas is criticized for seeing the ethical discourse as secondary compared to the moral discourse, and therefore tends to reduce the value of feminine, ethnic, and other discourses that go on 'in a different voice', to draw on Carol Gilligan's title (Gilligan 1982). Habermas' impartial discourse, Gilligan argues, is male, not universal.

If perhaps rigid, I think the distinction nevertheless is useful in order to understand the challenges that a modern public sphere is confronted with. The public sphere possesses two faces also in democratic respects, in Habermas' terms a moral and an ethical-existential. The line between the two faces are surely impossible to draw, but should be assumed analytically in order to see functions of the public sphere. We should see the public sphere as a medium between individual voices of a public on the one hand, and the political apparatus on the other. The public sphere transforms and transfers individual opinion into public opinion for the political system to take into account. A *voluntas* becomes transformed into a *ratio*, a consensus about what is practically necessary in the interest of all. To carry out this task, the public sphere must front both the people and politics, by addressing problems and issues as both moral and ethical-existential, and juggling issues between the two. Whereas the moral deliberative discourse are directed to politics and common problems and alternative solutions, the ethical-existential discourse constitute its social and cultural foundation, its reference background and testbed, its source for ideas and fresh thinking, with fewer conformity and constraints that press for consensus, more controversy, drama, agitation and passion. The ethical-existential discourse is more characterised by religious and other kinds of values and convictions that rarely becomes modified through discourse.

5. A European public sphere?

Let me now specify some of these thoughts to a European context. Curiously, in spite of the fact that the major part of Internet use tends to be local and national, there has been much debated whether the Internet undermines national sovereignty. However, its capacity to mediate information and communication across the globe, makes it natural to ask whether it can help to expand local and national public spheres into for instance European.

Bernhard Peters (2005) and his associates examined major national quality newspapers in five European countries in four different years from 1982 to 2003 in terms of their topics, public identities and communication flows. The results indicate that national newspapers increasingly address EU politics, European institutions and the EU in general, but the increase is slow. With reference to a common European identity, 'we'-references varies, but are modest. Most importantly here is their examination of communication flow across nations in the shape of arguments, facts that refer, comment, quote, or in other ways (for instance through hyper-links, RSS, blogrolls) send and receive insights back and forth. All in all however, national public spheres resist Europeanization. Peters et. al. conclude that there are no clear trends towards more European contributions and references from foreign sources. In fact, what goes on is more Americanisation than Europeanisation. Also, increasing information about European matters alone does not make a European discourse. Connections between contexts of deliberation are needed. A network of discursive nodes needs to be weaved. The trick is to conceive of the public sphere as an only partly institutionalized, mediated as well as unmediated network of meaning on public matters.

The need for a unified, presentational sphere of legitimacy for European political power has never existed until super-national power was introduced in Europe with the European Union. With the EU, the function of coerced supranational legitimacy will be enforced. However, Europe is far from being constituted as a federation of nation states. Politically, culturally Europe is a space of nation-states, nations and regions. Economic and scientific integration (as well as integration of arts, sports and religion) have since World War II not been followed by a constitution of a European public opinion. Our understanding of the present public sphere and its shape in the foreseeable future, will have to be influenced by this tension between local, regional, national and supranational needs for legitimacy. Add to this a mixture of media types, media organisations, languages, themes and conflicts, and we have a picture of an extremely complex network of public communication. Although there are overlapping agendas, international circulation of some quality newspapers, coverage of international events and international NGOs, a contemporary European public sphere, can only be imagined in a soft, weak-tie, paradoxical sense. It is a sphere of weakly interconnected spheres, a composite, unstructured, compartmentalized and power-law shaped space of public, and publicly relevant, communication. What can vaguely be spotted as a current European public sphere, is a by-product of media-technological innovation,

economically motivated standardization and market expansion, as well as of protest and social opposition.

The EU project has always been, and currently probably more than ever, in acute need of political legitimacy. Does this mean that a trans-national, European, unified public sphere is acutely required? I think not. From the network society perspective on the public sphere referred to above, a European public sphere consists of a multitude of small and large communicative segments operating in different areas and on different media, targeting different issues. To a certain degree many of these segments partly overlap or are linked indirectly together into a highly differentiated, multifaceted public sphere without a definite interface towards politics or culture. The European public opinion cannot be decoded at the front page of the Financial Times and El Pais. It is rather a complex network of various sites where topics circulate in various versions, and some not at all.

The diversity of media types, media scale and languages are not definite barriers for an international public sphere, since the term 'public' does not refer to media technologies or to language, but to communication and meaning (van de Steeg 2002). The scarce of common European media and a *lingua franca* are no absolute obstacles – they only require more time and cultural and linguistic effort. Neither is a common community of values an absolute requirement. As known, Habermas argues that a post-national discourse is possible which takes difference into account. Contrary to thicker', more communitarian or ethical-existential perspectives, the public sphere consists of communication and nothing else. It takes the shape of a multitude of interconnected networks of communicative flows, reproduced by different groups, issues, genres and media, indirectly laying a foundation for solving mutual problems. Issues, solutions and problems are confronted with each other and tested in an open opinion formation in a self-improving process. The distinction between public and not-public communication, is reproduced by deliberation itself. (Habermas 1996, 313, 373,) Also a minimal sense of collective identity, a sense of 'us', emerges from the communication, supporting and reproducing further deliberation. Legitimacy are produced not so much from broad participation as from the diversity and quality of argumentation being mobilised.

Thus, the term 'public sphere' refers not to language, media or identities, but to meaningful *communication*. All modern public spheres consist of a multitude of languages and media

today, even if certain languages and media tend to dominate within an area. The prerequisite is not heterogeneity, but that these differences are somehow connected and thus have a chance to influence each other. Thus to examine European public spheres, research needs to focus on *translations* and *interconnections* between media and agendas in Europe, which may transfer and take part in convergences of normative communication. In short, a public sphere can be understood as interconnected public debates with deliberative value. The conditions for interconnection, whether cultural values, common norms, a minimal language capabilities, and intertextual relationships between media, are vital for a large-scale and robust public sphere. Most of these interconnections are produced by the discourse of the public sphere itself. The public sphere consists of a multitude of more or less overlapping circles, each of which symbolises a social group of participants, a media type, a topic, a small or large number of voices, a local, national or international scale. Each of these dimensions are then in contact (as references, citing, as ‘memes’, argumentative support etc.) partly or totally in order for arguments and viewpoints to flow and transform.

Although there are examples of what we may call international or European media, both in the press, broadcasting and on the Internet, a European public sphere cannot rely on the development of such common arenas. The European public sphere – and I believe it exists only in a network-oriented sense – does not take the shape of a supranational sphere, but consist of thousands of mediated and unmediated discursive processes aimed at opinion formation at various levels, from the tiny island of Røst in Northern Norway, to Sicily, which are, and this I take to be the decisive point, interconnected directly and indirectly through weak ties. This is why an understanding of the public sphere would profit from the concept of the network as something more than a loose metaphor. Eriksen (2005, 351) argues that a European public sphere exists in the mutual observation of institutional actors and their audiences. Similarly, I argue that there is a European public sphere that revolves around observations of discourses, media and audiences. It is the complexity connections that potentially inform various discourses with new insights and possible solutions. In this way European publics receive and bring on perspectives in an international opinion formation. Very distributed communicative networks are difficult to observe as such from the political system. However, this is hardly any problem for the current public spheres, due to the focusing effect of large mass media. On the contrary, what poses problems today are rather too much concentration and commercialisation in the media sector, which tend to conform, level down and sensationalise public communication.

Today and for many years to come, national and local zones and agendas will dominate. The underlying references will be national and local. What we are talking about today, and what we can identify almost only through analysis of media content, is a *secondary* self-reference concerning the condition and future of Europe, just as we can see even stronger, secondary references to the future of the globe threatened by global warming. As Eriksen (2005, 355) holds: “what is lacking is the ability to link, filter and synthesize themes and topics in a general European public sphere, so that the citizens can form positions and express opinions about problems and solutions aired in the civil society”. We are so far left with national, segmented and topical zones of a public sphere, and certain cases of transnational public sphere zones like BBC International, Le Monde Diplomatique or the magazine Eurozine. In a wide variety of more or less invisible ways, they form a weak, fragile and unstable European public sphere of self-referential communication, oriented towards an integrated will formation in Europe.

In spite of the interconnections that doubtlessly connect opinion formation all over Europe, I cannot see a sufficiently strong European public sphere legitimating a deeper political Europe, in the form of a stronger European Parliament and a European Treaty or Reform. The referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005 were more than indications of this. Although we see cooperation and deliberative problem-solving at distinct subject areas (for instance among the trade union movement, and the alternative globalisation movement, among parties etc.), this does not at all reflect the general opinion formation in most European countries. Two possibilities present itself: A way is to build on a less normative and more operational concept of a public sphere than that developed by Habermas. Niklas Luhmann’s concept of public opinion is related to the ability of politics to produce politics. We can see the relevance of this perspective in the current rewriting of the European Convent into an apparently less ambitious Reform, and also in the strategic work to avoid national referendums over a new proposal. Luhmann’s (and Habermas to a lesser degree) view on public opinion is clearly oriented towards the ability of the mass media to coordinate and discipline divergent voices. Will the Internet make a difference?

The most promising way ahead for a European public sphere, is to continue developing *interconnections* between institutions, organisations, movements, associations, web-forums, in order to make the circulation of meaning in Europe more dense and robust. What is

needed is relatively transparent political systems that are sensitive to a) organisations in the civil society in Europe, and b) sensitive to an internationally circulating (media) discourse with broad and diverse participation. Only through networks of meaning can identifications to common problems and mutual understanding of possible solutions emerge. I am not talking about a European 'we' as strong as the national 'we'. My own interpretation of the current political integration attempts from The Commission, is that they are far too premature, and probably failing, due to the legitimacy deficit; the gap between elite ambitions and public sphere legitimacy. This is becoming even more acute with the Internet because it is less than the mass media oriented towards the national political system and the national audience as consumers of entertainment. The Internet is to a large extent to be more compared to international NGOs, groups and associations than to the mass media in building arenas for European deliberation.

6. Conclusion

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

While digital media brings increasing participation (and inequalities), fresh viewpoints and new solutions, it is harder to see how they enable consolidation and oversight. I do not argue that personal media are antithetical to the idea of a public sphere, but that they contribute much more to diversity than to convergence. Legitimacy and effectiveness of the public sphere and the democracy as a whole is dependent on not only diversity, but also coherence. How is the modern public sphere able to tackle its own indeterminacy, fragmentation and

complexity? In Habermas' model, procedural debates ensure that consensus does not have to rely on common ethical values to be actualised. The model assumes pluralism, not ethical conformity. This, however, requires that the discursive threads in various media and forums actually become connected. This is not necessarily the case with the Internet. Both sociology and media studies have focused on individualisation and the dependence of the individual on expert-systems. The consequences for the public sphere have been underestimated.

The possible solution lies on several levels, inside and outside the media, and in both the personal media and particularly the mass media. The mass media front this process vis-a-vis the national political systems. This will be status for many years to come. The reason for this is not simply technological conservatism, but is related to the structural features of the media as suitable carriers for a public sphere with democratic and political ambitions. The mass media are characterised by a rupture between senders and receivers, with underdeveloped possibilities for feed-back. This essential feature allows for public opinion to disseminate and circulate among elites and intellectuals, to be dealt with by languages of expertise, to transform into relatively consensual bodies of ideas, and to be easily scanned by the political system. Voices of opinion have the possibility to observe, to understand and to learn from one another.

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

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