Digital Networks and Democratic Possibilities
Habermas' Public Sphere in Contemporary E-Societies

Mr. Anirban Sarma
National Programme Officer (Communication and Information Sector)
UNESCO Office in New Delhi

1. Introduction

This essay asserts the relevance of Jürgen Habermas' concept of a public sphere for political engagement via the Internet. It contends that the Internet's openness to popular participation affords greater democratic potential than the traditional media in media-rich societies. Democratic participation on the Internet complements and affects the operations of more formal political structures, adapting to and creating new trends in political engagement.

Section 2 notes the expanding scope of Habermas' public sphere, and the pervasiveness of the 'network' metaphor in his recent work. Habermas (1996) characterizes both the public sphere and civil society as networks. Manuel Castells' notion of a 'network society' extends Habermas' scheme of communicative networks by mapping the latter on to electronic networks. Castells' theory is superimposed upon Habermas' networked public sphere and civil society, and this theoretical complex is applied to new forms of networked political participation. Sections 3, 4 and 5 discuss three types of 'networked politics' – online activism, protest movements launched on Facebook, and civic engagement. The examples in each section draw upon Habermasian and network theory to present certain key features of the public sphere, highlighting the latter's relevance for contemporary society.

Section 3 discusses the Zapatista movement and Seattle protests to demonstrate the public sphere's need for a safe deliberative space, the exertion of influence upon the dominant sphere, the Net-enabled expansion of the public sphere and political agenda, the symbiosis of public and private spheres as a source of empowerment, and ideological diversity rather than absolute consensus as an index of stronger democracy. Section 4 investigates Facebook's potential as a digital public sphere, by closely examining the 2008 protest movement in Colombia against the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Section 5 examines how civic culture and structured civic engagement support and are promoted by the electronic public sphere. The Minnesota E-Democracy is seen as a successful instance of a civic public sphere, while the case of Amsterdam's Digital City illustrates the public sphere's 'refeudalization'.

Section 6 concludes that the relevance and usefulness of Habermas' public sphere becomes evident through an evaluation of the Internet as a democratic space (albeit with certain qualifications). It observes, however, that further research needs to be conducted on the issue of power within Habermas' networked public sphere. Recognizing and theorizing the inequitable distribution of participatory power in the public sphere would make Habermas' concept more comprehensive and realistic.

2. Introduction: Habermas and Castells – a Theoretical Complex

Habermas' original conception of a public sphere derived from a specific socio-historical context – the emergence of a group within the educated and propertied bourgeoisie of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe, whose public discussions of contemporary culture and politics were characterized by rational–critical argumentation. The critical quality of discourse rather than personal status was the criterion of participation. But the ability to conduct 'rational' argumentation was a product of a high level of education, and participation was effectively restricted to the bourgeoisie (Habermas, 1989, pp. 26–43). The contribution of the bourgeois public sphere to democratic politics was tenuous at best.

More recently, Habermas has conceded the need to admit 'from the very beginning the coexistence of competing public spheres' and to take into 'account the dynamics of those processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere' (1992, p. 425). The recognition of multiple agents/centres of debate/opinion which are distinct from institutionalized deliberative forums has two key effects: (1) it signifies a shift away from an anachronistic participatory model to one that is dynamic, flexible and better suited to contemporary democracy; (2) it implies a dichotomy and creative tension between 'competing public spheres'

and the 'dominant' or 'refeudalized' public sphere institutionalized in the mass media.

These effects form the basis of Habermas' reformulation of the public sphere as a 'network for communicating information and points of view […] the streams of communication are in the process filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into topically specified public opinions' (1996, p. 360). The multidirectional network of communication and information exchange constitutes a new site of dialogue and social interaction (nested within but distinct from civil society) that detaches itself from 'the public's physical presence and extend[s] to the virtual presence of scattered readers, listeners or viewers' (p. 361). Quite evidently, for the later Habermas, locale ceases to circumscribe the discursive space: there is far greater openness to 'popular participation', 'the requirements of democracy and the nature of large-scale social organization' (Calhoun, 1992, pp. 3–4).

The idea of a network informs not just Habermas' notion of a public sphere, but also its underlying social structure. For Habermas, 'civil society' mediates between social issues in the private sphere and their transmission to the public sphere. Thus civil society, albeit a medium, is not unilinear but a 'network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres' (p. 367). Such a network is intrinsically egalitarian and underpins the democratic potential of the public sphere. In sum, the public sphere is a network that receives the issues upon which it deliberates from other networks of social and information exchange.

Habermas is concerned with the social and communicative capacity of networks. Manuel Castells appears to root his notion of the 'network society' (2004a) within the new Habermasian framework, but goes beyond it by mapping the social–communicative aspect of networks on to the technical–instrumental potential of digital networks:

'A network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by micro-electronics based information and communication technologies.' (2004a, p. 3)

Interestingly, the terms of Castells' analytical framework remain primarily social (though the technical implications are never far from the surface). Just as Habermas implied the reroutable character of networks comprising the public sphere and civil society, Castells notes the 'reconfiguring capacity inscribed in the process of networking' that enables 'the programs governing every network' to selectively re-orient themselves towards or to seek out new entities that may be assimilated into the network in order to enhance its value or performance (2004a, p. 23).

Further, Castells' assertion that the network society operates through a 'binary logic of inclusion/exclusion' which may shift with 'changes in the network's programs and with the conditions of performance of these programs' (p. 23) recalls Habermas' (1992) assertion that the operation of coexisting and competing public spheres is built upon a logic of inclusion within / exclusion from the dominant public sphere; and Habermas' (1996) characterization of civil society as a filtering mechanism for deciding if a subject is of sufficient 'general interest' to be included for / excluded from deliberation in the public sphere.

In a networked social system 'value' is decided by the dominant social institutions (Castells, 2004a, p. 24). Castells posits a realignment of networks to accommodate 'dominant' values: a hierarchy is created among networks on the basis of the transmission of values to them, or their adherence to particular values. This reflects Habermas' distinction between the 'dominant public sphere' of the mass media and decentred, competing public spheres. But a critical difference is the agency Habermas seems willing to assign to the network of public spheres. Habermas' silence about the influence of the dominant public sphere on competing spheres opens up a range of possibilities – from active resistance to alignment with dominant values.

The reconfiguration of the public sphere and the social structure itself as a system of overlapping networks has given rise to a new form of political engagement: 'Networked politics is individualized politics, which tries to connect to many other individuals, suddenly identified as recognizable citizens' (Sey and Castells, 2004, pp. 378). Contemporary democracies are marked by a perceptible increase in and shift to newer kinds of extra-parliamentarian politics that emphasize 'single issues rather than overarching platforms or ideologies', and are more closely related to people's lives and indi-

vidual identities. Engagement with 'lifestyle politics' articulates and shapes selfhood in ways that traditional politics cannot (Dahlgren, 2000a, pp. 311–15; 2001b, pp. 42–4).

The Internet's capacity to create multidirectional networks that can expand endlessly makes it the platform of choice for individual citizens, grassroots organizations, and political entrepreneurs who come together in an autonomous programme to redesign the political process. Lacking any direct control mechanism, the network develops around certain goals specified through deliberation within the network itself. While contributing to the plurality of the public sphere, the Internet also strengthens or stabilizes it, as voluntary participation in an interactive political network is an expression of commitment toward a personal political option. As the examples in the following sections on 'networked activism' and 'networked civic engagement' demonstrate, the use of the Internet for deliberative democracy confirms the dual orientation of participants' political engagement: while they directly influence the political system through their political programmes, they also seek to expand / contribute to the public sphere and civil society and confirm their 'own identities and capacities to act' (Habermas, 1996, p. 370).

3. Networked Activism

Three fundamental properties of digital networks – decentralized access / distributed outcomes, simultaneity, and interconnectivity – facilitate the democratic mobilization of activist networks across geographies. But the power of these 'counterpublic' spheres to negotiate with the dominant public sphere varies. Online activism may achieve the successful passage of oppositional messages 'from the seemingly remote spheres of micro media […] to mass media' (Bennett, 2001, np). Such 'crossovers' constitute the dialogue that Habermas deems necessary for reshaping the public sphere. The subsequent discussion of the Zapatista uprising and the 1999 protests at Seattle against the WTO demonstrate the crossover of messages, the Internet's potential as a democratic space, its ability to nurture counterpublics, and to physically realize virtual activism.

The causes of the 1994 indigenous Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico are well documented (Cleaver, 1998, pp. 623–7; Castells, 2004b, pp. 75–82). While e-mobilization efforts initially sought to consolidate popular support for the Zapatista movement, and construct collective outrage against the Mexican government's adherence to the NAFTA's neoliberalism, the Internet soon began to be used in other innovative ways. Online conferences and multilingual discussion forums facilitated active deliberation on the plight of Chiapas and democracy in Mexico. Post-1994, the Internet also functioned as a feedback device for people's response to inter/national plebiscites. Over a million people in Mexico participated in the plebiscites, and there were also about 81,000 responses from foreigners from 47 other countries (Cleaver, 1998, pp. 628–30).

The Internet created a corpus of readily accessible and verifiable information about the movement. International observers flocked to Chiapas, and their dependence on the Internet for firsthand and breaking news (with its implicit ideological bias) caused media messages to pass from the alternate to the mainstream mass media, or from the counterpublic to the public sphere. Habermas sees the tendency of counterpublics towards publics as a creative tension, necessary for the expansion of democracy. Paradoxically, alternate validity claims depend on the mass media for their validation and incorporation. As Rucht notes:

'[…] reactions of the mass media are a precondition for the ultimate success or failure of these movements. Therefore, from the local to the global levels, movements struggle for public visibility as granted (or refused) by the mass media. (2004, p. 32)'

Democratic deliberation requires a 'safe space' where 'discourse counter to the dominant' may be developed (Palczewski, 2001, p. 172). The Internet offers a relatively safe space for activists to deliberate and produce potentially subversive discourses, as decentralized, 'leaderless and virtually anonymous […] broadly distributed communication' via electronic networks challenges censorship even if it is closely monitored (Bennett, 2001, np). The safety of virtual space was central to the Zapatista movement, as mass support for the cause could continue to be consolidated online (and by extension via the mainstream media) even when the Mexican army forced the rebels to retreat into the hills in 1996. The most striking use of the Internet, however, has been in linking autonomous movements at regional and inter/national levels. Internet-enabled horizontal collaboration between the Zapatistas have promoted unity through diversity, allowing localized struggles to

articulate common objectives without compromising their autonomy and specificity. The intercontinental meetings organized in Chiapas (1996) and Spain (1997) drew thousands of grassroots activists, greatly enriching democratic institution-building, and expanding the sphere of deliberative democracy. The mobilization of 'overlapping social movement[s]' via decentralized electronic networks thus creates not a 'single unified movement', but a powerful, flexible, and far-reaching 'libertarian network' (Juris, 2004, pp. 352–4).

The anti-globalization movement has effectively harnessed the strategic potential of the Internet to engage with 'non-state, transnational targets such as corporations and trade regimes', and has demonstrated a 'growing coordination of communication and action across networks' (Bennett, 2003, p. 144). The 'Battle of Seattle' that resulted in the closure of the WTO ministerial meeting (1999) in Seattle was a watershed in the movement against free trade. The preceding year, the failure of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) had largely been an outcome of the Internet-based campaign of a network of organizations from about 70 countries. Although the online protests were supplemented by their offline counterparts, the Internet helped to cement the opposition that had begun simultaneously in several developed countries (Van Aelst and Wargrave, 2004, p. 100). The anti-MAI movement may be seen as a precursor to Seattle. Other than mass protests, there were several reasons for the failure of the Seattle Ministerial – the North–South divide and US–Europe agricultural divide. But the popular protests had by far the most powerful symbolic value, and were granted further visibility through extensive media coverage (Juris, 2004, p. 343).

The Internet played a major democratizing role in mobilizing opinion and subsequently translating it into action. The Seattle protests were coordinated primarily through email, electronic bulletin boards, chat rooms, online forums, and mobile phones. This form of networking generated physical mobilization on an unprecedented scale – mass demonstrations were coordinated and executed simultaneously in over 80 cities spanning many countries. Throughout 1999 the StopWTO distribution list provided detailed information on various aspects of the WTO, relevant to the protests. Other sites – particularly the umbrella website of the anti-WTO coalition – disseminated information, plans and schedules of protests / demonstrations. All deliberations were conducted in the public domain, and participation in the campaign was open to all. The flexibility and regenerative capacity of electronic networks proved remarkably useful for the campaign's continuity: when authorities crippled the Direct Action Network's (an action group) digital network, a new ad hoc mobile communications system could be re-assembled at short notice (Van Aelst and Wargrave, 2004, pp. 100–102; Hatcher, 2003, pp. 97–8).

The WTO History Project (www.wtohistory.org) at the University of Washington provides personal testimonies of and transcripts of interviews with several Seattle activists. A considerable number of interviewees mention the importance of personal digital media to social movements. All the interviewees draw attention to the sheer plurality of voices within the movement, and the advantages of horizontal collaboration between multiple, widely dispersed groups and individuals. The personal testimonies include accounts of evolving selfhood, and scepticism of the mass media. Stephanie Guilloud, an activist, combines notions of private and public with the circulation of messages in the dominant public sphere:

'As we begin to un-learn the social idea that newspapers and televisions tell us the truth, we see that individual voices are equally as valid and important. Simultaneously, we see our individual lives as connected to a much larger, more complex world. Our singular experiences are one story among thousands. And there were thousands. And we all have a story to tell.' (Guilloud)

The deconstruction of the dominant public sphere does not lead to a simple validation or relatively increased validity of the counterpublic sphere, but to a deeper recognition of the private sphere of the self and its participation in collective social articulation. Habermas describes the inextricability of the private ('individual') and public ('much larger, more complex world') spheres: 'the public sphere draws its impulses from the private handling of social problems that resonate in life histories' (1996, p. 366), and 'problems voiced in the public sphere first become visible when they are mirrored in personal life experiences' (p. 365). Selfhood or citizenship thus entails a blurring of boundaries between the public and the private. Narratives of personal identity replace 'collective social scripts as bases for social order'. Highly individualized identity processes ('our singular experiences') function as 'interpersonal

linkages' as 'network organization begins to displace' overarching systems and institutional hierarchies that hitherto conferred recognition and induced conformity (Bennett, 2003: 146). Habermas' notion of the reflexivity of the internal and the external becomes the basis of Net-enabled creative empowerment or 'networked individualism' (Wellman, 2000, np).

The polycentric and non-hierarchical yet integrated nature of networks opens them to popular participation. While the degree of openness implies respect for diverse identities, the plurality of voices may reflect a plurality of purpose, or the network's lack of ideological coherence. But Bennett rightly notes that openness to divergent views and concerted pursuit of multiple causes while focusing on a common target – rather than ideological unity – could make networked counterpublics particularly effective (2011, np). As a Seattle activist remarked, the protests 'at times with slightly different messages, but with a common goal of democratizing the global economy […] made the "Battle of Seattle" such an important event' (Almeida). The shift from consensus-oriented deliberation to a deeper discrete-issue-based democracy corresponds to Habermas' conceptual shift from the public sphere as a unitary 'realm […] in which something approaching public opinion can be formed' (1964, p. 49) to a network that synthesizes communication flows into 'topically specified public opinions' (1996, p. 360).

4. Facebook and Online Activism

Facebook, while ostensibly a platform for social networking, could function equally effectively as a platform for online activism. It is becoming increasingly common for individuals to create cause-based Facebook pages or groups. Visitors freely post their comments, related videos and news items on such pages, voicing their views, stirring debates, and transforming the Facebook 'wall' into a forum for deliberation, argumentation and discussion. Facebook's global reach, accessibility, and innovative methods of connecting people (by comparing lists of 'friends' and identifying 'mutual friends') allow users to engage with a variety of causes and socio-political movements.

The 2008 Facebook movement in Colombia to express outrage against the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish initials, FARC) demonstrated Facebook's power and potential as a Habermasian public sphere. Between 2002 and 2008, FARC had taken 700 Colombians hostage. Sympathy and public anger about the plight of FARC's hostages was widespread in the country, as was fear about what the powerful revolutionary army might do next to disrupt civilian life and political processes. In December 2007, FARC announced that it would soon turn over Clara Rojas (a hostage), her four-year-old son Emmanuel who had been born in captivity, and another hostage to the Colombian government. For the media, Emmanuel became a symbol – a promise of freedom from FARC's tyranny. As the media frenzy about Emmanuel's imminent release continued to grow, it emerged that he was not even in FARC's possession. The child had fallen ill a while earlier, had been 'dumped' with a peasant family, and was now unexpectedly in the government's hands, although most government officials including the president himself were unaware of the fact. As news spread via the national and private media, people began to express their disgust at both FARC and the government's handling of the matter, while also expressing their relief that Emmanuel was safe (Kirkpatrick, 2011, pp. 1–2).

Oscar Morales, a young Colombian civil engineer and an avid Facebook user, was surprised to find no anti-FARC groups or activism on Facebook. Responding to the media explosion around Emmanuel's release, on 4 January 2008 he created a Facebook public group called 'One Million Voices Against FARC' with a short description of the group's purpose (quite simply to stand up to FARC) and a logo overlaid with the four pleas 'NO MORE KIDNAPPINGS, NO MORE LIES, NO MORE KILLINGS, NO MORE FARC.' In the course of the next six hours, 1500 people joined the group, and by late afternoon on 5 January, the group had 4000 members. People had begun posting messages and opinions on the group's wall, and many of these generated organized and sustained discussions among members. Members soon began to speak not just of their resentment against FARC, but what they ought to do about it. On 6 January, a consensus had emerged that the burgeoning group should go public, and by the time the group grew to include 8000 members, people had begun to post 'Let's DO something' repeatedly on the discussion board. The creation of a public forum for discussion, the use of the Facebook wall as a feedback mechanism for people's responses, and the resultant public deliberation had set the stage for political action.

Morales and other active members of the group decided to stage a national march against FARC on 4 February 2008, exactly a month after the group's formation. Morales insisted that the march should take place not only in Bogota, Colombia's capital, but also at other locations throughout the country, including his hometown of Barranquilla, and created an event called the 'National March against FARC'. Group members in other cities (such as Miami, Buenos Aires, Madrid, Los Angeles, Paris and others), a significant proportion of whom were Colombian émigrés, argued that it ought to be a global demonstration as they wanted to be involved in the movement too. Group members thus began to plan a coordinated global march (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 4).

What followed was a remarkable instance of digitally fuelled activism. According to press estimates, on 4 February about 10 million people marched against FARC in hundreds of cities in Colombia. Almost 2 million others marched in other cities around the world. The mainstream media began covering plans for the upcoming demonstration, with stories focusing intensively on Facebook itself (a new American import in Colombia at the time) as a channel for political mobilization. Print articles and television programmes gauged Facebook's efficacy in terms of the astonishing extent to which it allowed young people to mobilize against FARC without feeling threatened, but rather by drawing courage from the strength of numbers and the magnitude of popular sentiment. (It was particularly surprising that most Colombians who signed up for the movement on Facebook did so under their real names.)

As news and messages swiftly 'crossed over' from the online public sphere to the dominant sphere constituted by the mainstream media in Colombia, the former's scope, scale and membership grew exponentially. A symbiotic relationship was created between the two public spheres: the media drew heavily on the opinions, breaking news and 'demonstration information' provided by the Facebook page, and the admiration and support of the mainstream media enhanced the credibility of and awareness about the Facebook group.
The political establishment also extended its full support to the anti-FARC movement. Local army commanders provided Morales with an armed escort, and mayors and city governments throughout Colombia worked closely with demonstration volunteers to facilitate the march by granting march permits and sanctioning additional security. Even when the movement had become a media sensation, Facebook remained the central source of information, means of mobilization and promotional tool. Besides helping coordinate a global event and express public outrage on a massive scale, Morales' anti-FARC movement had very real consequences. The joint statement drafted by Morales and his group was broadcast on television all over Latin America. Most significantly, FARC – acutely aware of the impending march – publicly announced immediately prior to the march that they would release a number of hostages, including several former Colombian congressmen. In the weeks that followed, they released many more (Kirkpatrick, 2011, pp. 4–6).

Although Facebook was not designed as a political tool, its creators realized intuitively that if the service allowed people to reflect their genuine identities online, a key aspect of their identities was likely to be their views and passions about urgent contemporary issues (Mezrich, 2010). Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, would subsequently say that the anti-FARC movement was 'a very early indicator that governance is changing – [and of how] political organizations can form. These things can really affect peoples' liberties and freedom, which is … the point of government. In fifteen years maybe there will be things like what happened in Colombia almost every day' (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 8). Indeed, four years after Morales' stunning success, one finds instances of political protest and democratic participation generated, catalysed and sustained by Facebook in every country and community where the service has gained currency.

5. Networked Civic Engagement

Habermas perceives civic culture as the normative bedrock of the 'associational network of civil society'. Civic culture comprises the set of preconditions for all democratic participation. Indeed, the Internet has come to play a significant role in promoting and strengthening civic culture. But it is not that the Internet makes people want autonomy. It is simply that people searching for autonomy tend to turn to the Internet as their medium of choice. Under conditions of autonomous citizenship and the operation of an open participatory, formal political channel, the Internet could begin to transform political engagement.

An open but formal communicative channel implies a

regulatory mechanism to moderate the quality of discourse. While online exchange is often informal and 'tangentially political' but nonetheless sustains 'interpersonal and civic relationships' (Coleman, 2007, p. 372), the moderation of online intercourse can only enhance the quality of deliberation without detracting from the creation of social capital through the network. The rational–critical argumentation among citizens that constitutes meaningful deliberation within the Habermasian public sphere can thus be maintained. The studies that Coleman reviews (2007, pp. 370–371) seem to indicate that 'more formally-structured modes of online talk' yield a more focused exchange and rational–critical debate than relatively unstructured online political talk and Usenet discussions. Departing from Habermas' normative ideal, unstructured Net forums often unwittingly privilege the right to speech over social responsibility, leading to a 'profusion of personal statements framed as evaluative positions' (Pinter and Oblak, 2006). Their claim to democratic communication is superficial.

Moderated democratic deliberation is the critical factor behind the continuing success of the Minnesota E-Democracy's (MED) civic network, which reasonably ganizers of the DDS connected inhabitants and local politicians by linking the City Hall's internal email system with the DDS, and making municipal and other local information available on an interactive electronic bulletin board. Realizing the importance of a focused democratic forum, the DDS's e-discussion groups were moderated by informed specialists (van den Besselar and Beckers, 2005, p. 68).

Although the DDS initially met Dahlberg's normative conditions, it was unable to preserve its autonomy from economic power. From a government-subsidized creative project, it changed into a self-sustaining nonprofit organization, and ultimately into a commercial company. There were concomitant shifts in its goals. When profitability became the primary motive, the DDS came to be considered solely from a cost angle, was found unsustainable, and liquidated (2005, p. 67). The latter phases of the DDS's evolution were characterized by 'better services' at the cost of 'citizen participation' and its aspirations to a democratic networked community was at odds with its rigidly top–down corporate structure. The cleavage between the foundation's managers (who held decision-making powers) and the network's members led the latter to abandon the DDS's democratic functions and use it merely as an Internet service and content provider (Castells, 2001: pp. 150–52)

The collapse of the DDS's autonomy due to the intrusion of economic power reiterates the need for a democratic space that is protected not just from the dominant discourse but from commercialization. The DDS's shift from a participatory civic culture to a consumer culture throws into relief the possibility of the public sphere's refeudalization. The DDS failed as a public sphere because 'rational–critical debate [was] replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception' (Habermas, 1989, p. 161). Its post-privatization role as a service provider led to a 'sharing of culture' that was a 'joint consumption rather than a more active participation in mutual critique' (Calhoun, 1992: 23). The commercialization of the media fundamentally alters their character and their relation to citizens: an 'exemplary forum' for democratic debate degenerates into just another 'domain for cultural consumption' (Thompson, 1995, p. 74). While Thompson critiques Habermas' concept of refeudalization chiefly on account of its exaggeration of consumers' passivity (1990, p. 116), the possible adverse effects of media commercialization are certainly very real.

'Privatized' forms of participation undermine the deliberative energy of civic networks, but a serious challenge is also posed by other less demanding kinds of political engagement: there is an overwhelming preference for direct individual-to-representative communication, rather than for rational–critical citizen-to-citizen dialogue. But individual-to-representative online services tend to be influenced and affected by those in power – by corporate backing and/or government websites' tendency to 'sell' policies and personalities – thus retarding their overall democratic potential (Dahlberg, 2001b, pp. 619–28). Despite providing a channel for communicating with politicians / political candidates, the liberal individualist model reduces dialogue between citizens, and citizens' engagement with civic associations, thereby impairing the creation of social capital. Individual discourse lacks the rational–critical character developed through debate; and divorced from the possible deliberative outcomes in civil society the individual does not possess sufficient autonomy to significantly alter the political process. Hence individual-to-representative interaction remains largely 'expres-

sive', lacking the instrumental power of the public sphere.

6. Conclusion

The utility of Habermas' public sphere in contemporary media-rich societies becomes evident through an assessment of the Internet's ability to foster democratic deliberation. The features of the Internet as a democratic space (its relation to the dominant public sphere, the private self, civil society, civic culture; its accommodation of different perspectives, promotion of focused rational–critical discussion; and the threat of its commercialization and degeneration into mere consumerism) largely correspond to Habermas' characterization of the public sphere. Although the Internet has 'unquestionably become a major medium in all industrialized societies' (Dahlgren, 2001a, p. 74), and is a better vehicle for extra-parliamentarian politics than the traditional media, unqualified optimism about its function as a public sphere should be resisted. Two provisos must be kept in mind. First, Internet growth has been phenomenal, but its use is still 'far from universal'. Second, using the Internet to discuss / engage with politics is a low priority, as compared to e-mail, information searches and business transactions (Dahlgren, 2001b, p. 47; Sparks, 2001, pp. 83–9). Thus it is difficult to conceive of the Internet as a substitute for formal political structures. But as this essay has shown, it provides an important and (for many) easily accessible deliberative space, embodying significant democratic potential.

Habermas' (1996) reformulation of the public sphere signals a new critical project of rethinking democracy and social structures in terms of networks. Rigorously retheorizing the public sphere from the perspective of social networks could yield important insights. The issue of power, in particular, needs to be problematized. While the bourgeois public sphere was essentially an exclusive power structure comprising the educated and propertied elite, Habermas' networked public sphere seems to elide the question of power, implicitly equating a distributive network with an equitable distribution of participatory power. Dahlberg notes that the relatively open deliberative space of the Internet may be 'colonized' by 'pluralist interest groups' and 'individualist participants' (2007, p. 130). More interestingly, Castells points out that power in networks is controlled by 'programmers' who are able to re/programme networks' purposes and goals, and by 'switchers' who can 'connect different networks to ensure their cooperation' (2004, p. 32). Further research is needed to identify these actors and thus locate the play of power in the context of Habermas' public sphere. While Habermas accounts for external threats to the public sphere (from the dominant discourse, commercialization, etc.), the recognition of possible threats from within would make the theory both more realistic and relevant.

REFERENCES:

• Almeida, Tico, Personal Testimony, [http://depts.washington.edu/wtohist/testimonies/TicoAlmeida.htm]; accessed on 23.12.07.

• Bennett, W Lance, (2001), 'New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism', in Nick Couldry and James Curran, eds, Contesting Media Power, Rowman and Littlefield, London. Available at [http://depts.washington.edu/gcp/pdf/bennettnmpower.pdf]; accessed on 20.12.07.

• (2003), 'Communicating Global Activism: Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Networked Politics', Information, Communication and Society, 6(2): 143–68.

• Calhoun, Craig, (1992), 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere', in Craig Calhoun, ed, Habermas and the Public Sphere, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

• Castells, Manuel, (2001), The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

• (2004a), 'Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint', in Manuel Castells, ed, The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.

• (2004b), The Power of Identity, Vol. 2, 2nd edn, Blackwell, Oxford.

• Cleaver, Harry M, (1998), 'The Zapatista Effect: The Internet and the Rise of an Alternative Political Fabric', Journal of International Affairs, 51(2): 621–40.

• Coleman, Stephen, (2007), 'E-Democracy: The History and Future of an Idea' in Robin Mansell et al, eds, The Oxford Handbook of Information and Communication Technologies, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

• Cover, Jane, Personal Testimony, http://depts.washington.edu/wtohist/testimonies/JaneCover.htm]; accessed on 23.12.07.

• Dahlberg, Lincoln, (2001a), 'Extending the Public Sphere through Cyberspace: The Case of Minnesota E-Democracy', First Monday, 6(3). Available at [http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/838/747]; accessed on 15.01.08.

• (2001b), 'The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere', Information, Communication and Society, 4(4): 615–33.
• (2007), 'The Internet and Discursive Exclusion: From Deliberative to Agonistic Public Sphere Theory', in Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, eds, Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
• Dahlgren, Peter, (2000a), 'Media, Citizenship and Civic Culture', in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, eds, Mass Media and Society, 3rd edn, Arnold, London.
• (2000b), 'The Internet and the Democratization of Civic Culture', Political Communication, 17(4): 335–40.
• (2001a), 'The Transformation of Democracy?', in Barrie Axford and Richard Huggins, eds, New Media and Politics, Sage, London.
• (2001b), 'The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space and Communication', in W Lance Bennett and Robert M Entman, eds, Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
• Habermas, Jurgen, (1964), 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article', New German Critique, 1(3).
• (1989), The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, trans. Thomas Burger, Polity Press, Cambridge.
• (1992), 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in Craig Calhoun, ed, Habermas and the Public Sphere, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
• (1996), Between Facts and Norms, trans. William Rehg, Polity Press, Cambridge.
• Hatcher, Mark, (2003), 'Public Affairs Challenges for Multinational Corporations', in Steve John and Stuart Thompson, eds, New Activism and the Corporate Response, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
• Juris, Jeffrey, (2004), 'Networked Social Movements: Global Movements for Global Justice', in Manuel Castells, ed, The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham
• Kirkpatrick, David, (2011), The Facebook Effect, Virgin Books, London.
• Mezrich, Ben, (2010), The Accidental Billionaires: Sex, Money, Betrayal and the Founding of Facebook, Arrow, London.
• Palczewski, Catherine Helen, (2001), 'Cyber-movements, New Social Movements, and Counterpublics', in Robert Asen and Daniel C Brouwer, eds, Counterpublics and the State, SUNY Press, Albany.
• Pinter, Andrej, and Tanja Oblak, (2006), 'Is There a Public Sphere in This Discussion Forum?', in Katharine Sarikakis and Daya K Thussu, eds, Ideologies of the Internet, Hampton Press, Creskill, NJ.
• Rucht, Dieter, (2004), 'The Quadruple "A": Media Strategies of Protest Movements since the 1960s', in Wim van de Donk et al, eds, Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements, Routledge, London.
• Sassi, Sinikka, (2001), 'The Transformation of the Public Sphere?', in Barrie Axford and Richard Huggins, eds, New Media and Politics, Sage, London.
• Sey, Arabella, and Manuel Castells, (2004), 'From Media Politics to Networked Politics: The Internet and the Political Process', in Manuel Castells, ed, The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
• Sparks, Colin, (2001), 'The Internet and the Global Public Sphere', in W Lance Bennett and Robert M Entman, eds, Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
• Thompson, John B, (1990), Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication, Polity, Cambridge.
• (1995), The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media, Polity, Cambridge.
• Van Aelst, Peter and Stefaan Walgrave, (2004), 'New Media, New Movements?', in Wim van de Donk et al, eds, Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements, Routledge, London.
• van den Besselaar, Peter, and Dennis Beckers, (2005), 'The Life and Death of the Great Amsterdam Digital City', in Peter van den Besselaar and Satoshi Koizumi, eds, Digital Cities III: Information Technologies for Social Capital – Cross-cultural Perspectives, Springer, Amsterdam.
• Wellman, Barry, (2000), 'Changing Connectivity: A Future History of Y2.03K', Sociological Research Online, 4(4). Available at [http://www.socresonline.org.uk/4/4/wellman.html]; accessed on 25.12.07.