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The Impact of the Internet on the Public Sphere and on the Culture Industry

A study of blogs, social news sites and discussion forums

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis analyses how certain services of online communication (blogs, discussion forums, social news and bookmarking sites) contribute to the public sphere and to the culture industry.
The concept of public sphere is derived from Jürgen Habermas' idea that political power can only be legitimate if it is applied in accordance with the best, common interests of the society – but these interests can only be crystallized in discursive debates between members of the society. However, contemporary national public spheres are said to be distorted and detached from real interests of citizens. The internet, through offering the possibility of democratic and reflexive communication, holds the potential of improving the state of public spheres.
The concept of culture industry holds that the capitalization of the production of cultural products (i.e. works of art) rids societies of authoritative art, the one channel through which real individual freedom can be established. “Culture industry” is instrumental, through the promotion of consumption, to the capitalist domination of a few over masses. This, in turn, affects the general state of the public spheres. Once again, the internet has the potential to democratize this over-encompassing culture industry, through increasing cultural diversity via its several new channels of information and distribution.
The analysis of blogs, discussion forums and social bookmarking and news sites confirms the democratic potential inherent in these services, but it also points out certain problems that hinder the actualization of this potential.
It is established that the use of the generalizing category of “blogs” is misleading, because of the fake underlying dichotomy of “blogs *vs* traditional media.” The large, fragmented and asymmetrically interlinked (small, influential core and large, extremely fragmented periphery) totality of blogs is found to be contributive to the public sphere mostly as an alternative and very fast channel of information dissemination.
The role of discussion forums is found to be ambiguous, certain forums being absolutely irrelevant, while others establishing powerful advocacy media and global issue publics.
Social news sites are found to be potentially most constructive from the point of view of the public sphere, because they tend to effectively promote reasoned argumentation.

KEYWORDS: Habermas, public sphere, internet, blog, forum, social news site

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the effects of certain services of the internet[1] on the practical concepts of "public sphere" and "culture industry." There are various understandings of both of these concepts.

The term "public sphere" in the original theory of Jürgen Habermas (1989) referred to an idealized sphere of social interaction, where independent private persons exchanged information in the form of rational debate, so as to give voice to a kind of public opinion on important matters – such as the ruling of the state. The original concept has been subject to ample criticism; but without further burrowing into questions of theory, suffice it to say here that the public sphere is some kind of an intangible area, made up of physical (e.g. a coffee house) and virtual (e.g. an internet chat room) places as well as various pieces of technology (e.g. telephone wires, TV sets or copies of magazines), where people can exchange information about questions concerning the public[2]. The public sphere is important because in a secular world, it is expected to legitimate the rule of a small minority of people over an entire state. It is at the same time the prerequisite of, and a guarantee for meaningful, legitimate democracy. But presently, national public spheres cannot complete their original objectives, as they have been “re-feudalized” in line with exclusive, business interests of an affluent minority.

The expression "culture industry" originally referred to the unwelcome commercialization of culture (meaning, roughly, valuable arts and pieces of entertainment), which eventually lead to all cultural products becoming shallow, worthless and boring. Mass produced culture is, according to the original theory, constantly creating a need for new pieces of entertainment (holding the promise of escaping from the drudgery of the everydays), but these new cultural products are essentially always the same, and as such they can never offer full satisfaction to their consumers. The culture industry is perpetuating itself, and so perpetuating the domination of capitalism. (Adorno & Horkheimer 1999.)

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1 Throughout this paper I will stick to the tradition of referring to the internet with lower case 'i'. On the spelling of this word see Long (2004).

2 What "the public" is is a question of great theoretical importance, and as such will be covered later in this paper.

In this thesis, I will utilize the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, because I think it is still relevant and meaningful (although not necessarily in the original ways Habermas himself intended it to be), despite ample criticism and numerous revisions. **Through individual analysis of certain particular services available on the internet, I will attempt to assess whether or not this global computer network could contribute to the operations of the public sphere(s).**

An underlying hypothesis of this paper is that the internet affects both the public sphere and the culture industry, and its impact could be empirically detected and measured.

1.1 Internet – an unfulfilled promise?

One of the key links between the internet, the public sphere and the culture industry is that **the internet, as a decentralized and global communication channel, seems to hold the promise of (re-)democratizing both the public sphere and the culture industry.** In the Western world, it is not such an over-exaggeration to say that almost anyone can make themselves heard on the ‘net; it seems the ideal, unrestricted medium for the exchange of information. It also helps the access to cultural products (e.g. in the form of digital music distribution), and gives audiences a greater freedom of choice.

This is why I am interested in the internet. More precisely, it is my doubts about the possible success of this democratizing process. I am writing this paper with an underlying hypothesis in mind, which can be summed up like this: the internet fails to deliver the communication democracy it promises, precisely because of the overwhelming freedom it provides. Its freedom is confusing and, paradoxically, restrictive. (Keohane and Nye (2002: 171) refer to this as "the paradox of plenty.")

In other words: a significant part of the world's population does not and cannot have access to the internet because of various (usually economic) reasons. But even those who do have access to it, cannot exploit its full potential, because unrestricted communication becomes unstructured at the same time – and it is great that everybody can have a voice on the net, but if everybody is speaking at the same time and, more importantly, nobody is aware of where everybody else is, let alone pay attention or understand them, it is hard to conduct a meaningful dialogue or form a common opinion (even if such a dialogue is not global, but only concerns smaller groups of people).

It might be that such dialogues can only form if the new "electronic communication

culture" eventually leads to a technology-oriented dystopia, where the buzzword "content" is actually more important than *what* that actual content is. This side of the problem is more eloquently illustrated by Lash and Urry:

> The growth of information may be seen as liberating or as repressive. On the one hand, the use of new forms of information technology may facilitate the development of small communitarian public spheres. […]. Or on the other hand, information technology can lead to new forms of control and erode the critical crafts of reading and writing. (1994: 324.)

In one of his later works, speaking about "the paradox of the information society," Lash also asks the question: "[h]ow can such highly rational production result in the incredible *ir*rationality of information overloads, misinformation, disinformation and out-of-control information?" (2002: 2). In my hypothesis, the explanation lies in the uncontrollable multiplicity of information sources on the internet.

It is also because of that abundance of information that the net fails to solve the problem of media bias: as post-modern theoretician John Hartley (1996: 86–87) noted, ever since the media was born, it has always been biased, and therefore no single medium could give fully impartial representation. This hasn't changed with the coming of the information age, but the internet did make rival media more easily accessible. So it is, in theory, easier to form a sufficiently objective picture of events by comparing various sources' representations. And yet, according to my working hypothesis, this is merely the theory – in practice, this is also an unexploited potential of the internet.

The backbone of this thesis will be to test the validity of this hypothesis, using a practical approach, supported by considerable theoretical framework.

1.2 The internet, the public sphere and (post-)modernity

Before advancing any further, I feel it important to address the question of how this paper relates to the disagreements about the public sphere, due to the differing views of modern and post-modern academic traditions.

The rivalry of the modern and post-modern views has been at the heart of the debate about the public sphere (cf. McKee 2002: 8–17). The debate concerns attitudinal differences towards modernity based on the Enlightenment values of equality, freedom, justice, comfort and solidarity: "[t]he growing critique of modernity […] challenges the assumptions which link, on the one side, increasing rationality and faith in science,

innovation and progress generally, with, on the other side, enhanced social harmony, moral development, justice and happiness" (Dahlgren 1995: 73).

Habermas' modernist view, arguing for the desired completion of the "unfinished project of the Enlightenment" is often attacked by post-modern academics (Dahlgren 1995: 74), and a key point of disagreement concerns the fragmentation of the public sphere (McKee 2002: 141–148).

From a modernist point of view (see for example Garnham 1992; Bohman 2004), a single and unified public sphere, corresponding to the scope of authority of the institutions it might influence[3], is desirable, while the post-modern tradition rejects this idea, and argues for the viable coexistence of multiple public spheres, not least because there is no one set of questions that should exclusively be addressed in a supposedly official public sphere. Everybody is a member of multiple different groups and "what's really important for a group is what that group thinks is really important to it" (McKee 2002: 151), in the post-modern paradigm.

When I argue for the internet's failure to deliver democracy in communication, it might seem that I take a modernist position, considering a post-modern, fragmented scene of a multitude of electronic public spheres undesirable. This is not so: throughout this paper I try not to take a stand in the modernism vs. post-modernism debate (partly because I agree with Dahlgren (1995) in that differences between the two views are often artificially magnified). This debate mostly concerns attitudes, while I try to focus on empirically proven facts. The internet seems to hold the potential to democratize public communication – and thus possibly to create a single and unified public sphere; and I believe it is possible to examine whether or not this potential is fulfilled without having to debate whether or not such a single public sphere would be a "good thing."

1.3 The internet does matter

Even without a precise definition of the notion "public sphere," one could suspect that the internet has something to do with it. The internet is merely a network of computers,

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[3] I.e. even if there was a single, unified and unobstructed global public sphere, it might fail to become relevant because there are no such institutions that could have a global scope of authority, and therefore even if a global consensus is reached in the public sphere, there will be ne way to systematically and institutionally implement it. See Bohman (2004) – and chapter 3.3.

and the very purpose of networks is the exchange of products, resources or information. The relationship between the ‘net and the culture industry might not seem so obvious. But there is indeed such a relationship; and it has, in my understanding, two layers.

First, the internet affects the business model of the culture industry, through offering new ways of distribution and marketing (these new ways can be, at least *de jure*, illegal), as well as new ways of tapping into the "creative resources" of the world and producing new kinds of cultural products.

The second layer of the relationship between the internet and the culture industry stems from the *relevance* of cultural industry. This aspect of the cultural industry also explains why it is inseparable from the institution of public sphere. For a working definition, let's just say that the culture industry refers to all those lines of business which aim to produce and present or sell cultural products – books, movies, music, pieces of art etc[4]. Products of the culture industry ("texts") are not crucial or indispensable for human beings, but they are still *relevant,* because, according to Hesmondhalgh (2002: 3–7), they modify the way we interpret and understand the world – consequently, they influence our identities and ways of life. But before a text could reach us, it passes through the public sphere – whether this would mean advertising, media or word-of-mouth passing of information. Moreover, the discursive environment of the public sphere is also where (or *through which*) change, inspired by the texts of the culture industry, can take place. In an atomized society, without meaningful public dialogue constituting a public sphere, a culture industry could possibly not function. But that, of course, would not be a problem, because nobody would need it anyway, as nobody would understand the concept of experiencing the relationship between the subjectivity of the self and that of others (manifested in texts of the culture industry).

To sum it up, the public sphere is indispensable for the culture industry because it acts as a mediator between audiences and producers of texts. (See also chapter 2.7 about the culture industry.) This is the second layer of the relationship between the culture industry and the public sphere (and the very point of this paper is to examine whether the internet could really be an effective and helpful part of this connection).

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[4] As it will be covered later in detail, David Hesmondhalgh (2002: 12) lists the "core" cultural industries as follows: advertising and marketing, broadcasting, film, the internet industry, the music industry, publishing, video and computer games.

Habermas argues that there has also been a historical link between the culture industry (although nobody called it "culture industry" at the time) and the original, bourgeois public sphere: it was in the "world of letters," in the first literary debates of the 18th century that readers could prepare and practice the "audience-oriented subjectivity" that is at the heart of critical public discussion. The public sphere was born in the world of letters: "[t]he self-interpretation of the public in the political realm […] was the accomplishment of a consciousness functionally adapted to the institutions of the public sphere in the world of letters" (Habermas 1989: 55; see also Habermas 1992: 423).
This link still does exist, even if the public sphere(s) of today are markedly different to the ideal bourgeois public sphere of Habermas. Discussion about products of the culture industry is natural in the Western world, running on consumption-oriented capitalism.

1.4 Western traditions

In this paper I will also touch the issue of a possible global, and as such, intercultural public sphere. Therefore I feel obliged to underline that both the Habermasian concept of public sphere and that of culture industry are originally situated in the Western world of consumer capitalism. This is not to say that an institution akin to the the Habermasian discursive public sphere could not exist or function in other civilizations (or, for that matter, globally), but to point out a possible inherent deficiency of the model of the public sphere I will use.
The internet, having started out as a military project in the cold war (Living Internet 2000), also originates from the West. However, given that this latter is "only" a piece of technology, it can spread much easier than abstract concepts. It does spread indeed, and this is why the question of whether a global public sphere (or even a dialogue of different cultures) could evolve on the internet (possibly in the form of a meta-public sphere), is relevant and topical.
When addressing this question, ideally, this paper should consider how the concepts of public sphere and cultural industry could be translated or adapted to various non-western cultures. An important limitation of this paper is that it cannot undertake this task. Throughout this paper, I will represent a Western point of view, because of the Western ideas embedded in the original concepts I am examining. I still hope to be aware of the limitations of such an approach, and to be able to point out where, and in

which ways, this Western focus gives rise to problems. But the deep, detailed analysis of public spheres and culture industries in other, non-western cultures, remains to be a possible subject of other, further studies.

1.5 Theories and technologies

Throughout this paper, I will try to be as practical as possible in my approach, partly because I came to the view that important theoreticians and thinkers of the topic tend to neglect the importance of empirical evidence or practical applicability altogether. I also hope to provide a solid theoretical background for the empirical analysis.

First, I will present the two key theories of this paper: that of the public sphere and that of the culture industry, briefly running through and presenting the debates around them.

Then I dedicate one chapter to current theories about the internet, and its relationship with the public sphere and the culture industry. In order to present these theories in a coherent manner, I will use the analytical framework provided by Dahlgren (1995), who used it in his analysis of the relationship between television and the public sphere.

Finally, I shall look at how the practicalities of the internet support all the theories, focusing on a handful of services available online: blogs, social bookmarking and news sites, RSS and discussion forums.

Both in the theoretical and the empirical part of this study, I will try to keep my focus on intercultural questions, such as: is it possible for different cultures to cooperate in running a meaningful public sphere (or a meta-public sphere, consisting of smaller, fragmented public spheres)? Could such a public sphere be even global? Could the internet change the business operations of the culture industry (or culture industries) in such a way that cultural diversity is supported? However, I would like to stress the limitations of this paper, mentioned under chapter 1.4, stemming from its decidedly Western approach.

2 Theories of the public sphere and the culture industry

In this lengthy chapter I present the two sets of theories that give the backbone of this paper: the theories about the (Habermasian) public sphere, and the most important thoughts about the phenomenon of the culture industry.

2.1 The bourgeois public sphere

Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was originally published in 1962. Its first English translation came to daylight more than 30 years later. This volume used the concept of public sphere in reference to all the places and events which accommodate critical and reasoned discourse, that is, where participants put "their reason to public use," to formulate a common (public) opinion, and thus to reflect on and to legitimate the operations of a government (as well as to critically evaluate the latest works of art and "products of the culture"). The public sphere rather *happens* than *exists:* it happens in coffee houses, in reading rooms and libraries, in reading the newspaper of listening to the speech of a government representative – everywhere where there is a meaningful discussion going on about public issues. (Habermas 1989.)

The *Structural Transformation...* is about the history of this public sphere. It presents a theory that is at the same time a narrative – a story.

The story of the real public sphere begins, according to Habermas, in the 18th century. Prior to that, in the middle ages, no meaningful public sphere could exist: what could have been termed "public sphere" of the feudalism of the middle ages was a sphere of *representation*, a social place where ruling classes of the society could present the symbols that were supposed to legitimate their – most certainly undemocratic – rule. A public sphere in the modern sense of the word could not exist not least because of the lack of privacy: it is a crucial point in Habermas' theory that the notions of public and private presuppose one another – but under the regime of feudalism, there was no real distinction between these two categories, everyone being merely a link in the feudal chain, representing the ownership of the land. (Habermas 1989: 10–25.)

This changed by the 18th century, with a combination of the development of early capitalism, technologies such as mass printing and transportation, the weakening of the

role of the church[5], and the strengthening of the bourgeoisie (originally referring to the layer of society whose members gained wealth and power because of their trade and profession, not because they were born into aristocratic families).

In Germany, Britain and France, it was members of the bourgeoisie – educated, property-owning, white males – that, according to Habermas, could experience a hitherto unknown type of subjectivity, and through this develop a certain self-awareness, a reflexive group identity, which made it possible for them to act as a *public*[6]. This public, for the first time in history, could act as a "social and political force [that could] articulate collective political demands against the old estates and the states" (Nieminen 2000: 111). Importantly, Habermas makes a distinction between the **cultural** and the **political** public spheres, the former being the place where the "audience-oriented subjectivity" and "reflexive group identity" could develop, and the latter being the place where these forces were put to political use.

Members of this public (note that it is quite a restricted use of the word, as it refers to only a very small part of the people – educated and wealthy members of the bourgeoisie) would convene in various settings – e.g. in French salons, British coffee houses and at the meetings of German reading societies –, they would discuss about public matters, phrase their own thoughts about the desired ways of organizing state affairs, had these thoughts published in letters and in newspapers, and as a result of this intellectual activity, combined with the growing economic weight of the bourgeoisie, the concept of modern democratic nation states could be born.

The connection of democracy and public sphere is crucial. One cannot exist without the other. If democracy means exercising the power of the state in line with the will of the citizens, then there needs to be some kind of a public opinion that would represent the "general interest" of the people, and that would guide those who make decisions in the name of the state. And it is in the debates and discussions of the public sphere that this "general interest" is crystallized. **It is the public sphere that could rationally justify**

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5 A crucial turn of events; see also the *Theory of Communicative Action* (or the next chapter in this paper).

6 "In the course of the 18th century, the bourgeois reading public was able to cultivate in the intimate exchange of letters […] a subjectivity capable of relating to literature and oriented toward a public sphere. In this form, private people interpreted their new form of existence which was indeed based on the liberal relationship between public and private spheres." (Habermas 1989: 171.)

the political domination of a few people over an entire state (Habermas 1989: 180). (Moreover, at the birth of the public sphere, stakes were high, because the initial question was not "What is the general interest of the citizens?" but rather "Should the general interest of the citizens replace the interest of the aristocratic ruling class in exercising power?" (Habermas 1989: 28). The bourgeoisie represented the general interest in that it promoted the values of the Enlightenment (equality, freedom, justice, comfort and solidarity)[7]; Habermas' starting point is that democracy is naturally preferable to practising state power without reference to the will of the citizens.)
The link between the public sphere and democracy also means that a *democratic* public is necessarily a *discursive* public (or that a *public* is not merely a bunch of people together, without interaction, a public is a public because of the communication of its members; it is more than a mere sum of the parts). (Habermas 1989: 3–7, 21.)

The golden age of the bourgeois public sphere did not last long. Perhaps it was a natural development that it had to compromise itself. Capitalism became more and more aggressive (affecting more and more areas of everyday life), and, partly in order to counter the negative effects of such a development, partly in order to provide more and more services (such as education or social security insurance), nation states interfered more and more with private lives of the citizens. The role of the institutions of employment also grew, coming to represent something that is between the private and public spheres, and therefore the crucial dividing line between private and public became blurred. One could say, it simply lost its original importance (at least from the point of view of the original bourgeois public sphere), because once democracies were established and the idea of monarchies and hereditary ruling seemed to fade into the past, there was no need to fight for them any more. What becomes a given can no longer be a force to propel change in a society. (Habermas 1989: 151–152, 176–180.)
In addition, as democracy became generally accepted, the bourgeoisie, also beset by fragmentation and internal differences of opinion, lost its exclusive role: if democracy meant public participation in the political domination, then working classes wanted to

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[7] It was the bourgeoisie that was in the position to promote these changes because it had the power, the "autonomy based on ownership of private property" (Habermas 1989: 55) to do so.

take part, too (as well as other groups of the society – most importantly: women). The public became more and more fragmented, first only in that more and more groups of people gained voting rights, and later in the course of history in the sense that various groups, usually tagged as "new social movements," such as feminist, gay or ethnic right movements, gave proof of their self-consciousness and demanded recognition beyond voting rights. (Dahlgren 1995: 8; McKee 2002: 143–147.)

As a result of this fragmentation, and the blurring of the private / public distinction, the public sphere became once again re-feudalized, meaning that it once again became a public sphere of empty representation (Habermas 1989: 177–180). **This re-feudalization means "closed doors politics"** (a system in which parties seek popularity so that they get into power, but once there, they make important decisions behind closed doors, without referring to the discourse of the public sphere and possibly without following the general interest of the populace), **the misinterpretation of public opinion, and the public sphere becoming a sphere of advertising**. In other words, even if the formalities of democracy are maintained, this does not legitimate the rule of the leading few – on the contrary, those abusing their power can hide behind the fact that this power was acquired through formally perfectly democratic procedures[8]. In addition, while in the case of the bourgeois public sphere the activity of reading literature was seen as a way to develop and cherish an independent, individual subjectivity, in the new public sphere, the cultivation of subjectivity in works of art is no longer appreciated, thanks to the commercialization of *the culture industry*. (Habermas 1989: 160–163, 166–167; Dahlgren 1995: 8.)

The theory of the bourgeois public sphere has been criticized by others and revised by Habermas himself. But I think it is still important because of its underlying premises: that there *is*, or at least there *may be* a public sphere, an intangible but crucially important space where communication is taking place and public opinion is formed; and that this public sphere in its ideal form both presupposes and guarantees democracy.

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[8] "In terms of political theory, Habermas uses the theory of communicative action to articulate a substantial conception of democracy in contrast to a mere formal one" (Malmberg 2006: 11).

2.2 The Theory of Communicative Action

Responding to criticism of its original theory, Habermas made some adjustments to it – most importantly, admitting that his original notion of the public sphere, focusing solely on members of the bourgeoisie, was both idealized and too restrictive (Habermas 1992). But he also presented a new, much less historical theory about the legitimative powers of unrestricted communication: the theory of communicative action.

The theory of communicative action starts from a simple question: how can secular, non-sacred domination be legitimated? Why do people accept others as genuine rulers or leaders, if these leaders cannot legitimate their rule with supernatural concepts such as being a direct descendant of gods or having been given power by God?

The standard answer to this question had been, for many important scholars, that in modern societies the morality of laws is transformed into "externally imposed law" (Habermas 1987, vol. 2: 80). In other words, if people abide by laws, that is because they are forced to do so by the state.

But Habermas rather supports the idea of Émile Durkheim: Durkheim proposed that secular law can be accepted as legitimate because of an unspoken agreement among members of the society, that states that rulers will follow the best interest of the society[9]. This common interest is, in Habermas' understanding, "by no means the sum of, or a compromise between" people's individual interests; instead, it is *reflective* on them[10].

This common interest is distilled, or "communicatively shaped and discursively clarified" in the public sphere. **This is what explains the importance of the public sphere: it serves as a proof of legitimacy of political domination**. "The unity of the collectivity can be established and maintained *only* as the unity of a *communication community*, that is to say, *only* by way of a consensus arrived at communicatively in the public sphere" (Habermas 1987, vol.2: 82).

The fact that makes such a consensus possible is that, according to Habermas, speech acts are always potentially (even if implicitly) rational. This rationality means

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[9] "[...] the obligatory character of a contract is based on the legitimacy of the legal regulations that underlie it; the latter count legitimate *only insofar as they express a general interest*." (Habermas 1987, vol. 2: 80.)

[10] "The role of the state is not to express and sum up the unreflective thought of the mass of the people, but to superimpose on this unreflective thought a more considered thought, which therefore cannot be other than different" (Habermas 1987, vol. 2: 81).

that whoever is communicating is capable of arguing for their best interest. Every act of meaningful social interaction in an undistorted situation could be described as steps of communicative action in order to establish a mutual understanding (intersubjectivity) between the participants, with rational claims about their respective best interests. The key to democracy is the equality that is offered by the universally human, universally equal faculty of language.

Speech acts are hardly ever take place in undistorted situations; but in some cases the potential rationality of communication can manifest itself in social changes of great magnitude – as in the birth of the bourgeois public sphere (Nieminen 2000: 112–113).

The theory of communicative action distinguishes between two great social spheres in modern societies: *lifeworld* (Lebenswelt) and the economic and administrative *system*.

Lifeworld refers to "life as it *should* be lived:" it comprises of all the "communicatively structured" spheres of life, all the social interactions where rational, communicative action is practised. The lifeworld is even less tangible concept than the public sphere: it is a loose, unorganized sphere that refers to instances of communicative action taking place in an ideal society. (Habermas 1989, vol. 2: 319.)

In the original volume introducing the theory of communicative action, the public sphere is incorporated "in an unspecified manner" in the lifeworld (Malmberg 2006: 5), however, Habermas himself returned to the issue – see chapter 2.3.

In contrast to the lifeworld stands the economic and administrative *system*, the invisible and intangible construct of power in a society. The aim of the system is to maintain the stability of, and to reproduce, society (but *culture* is reproduced in the lifeworld, not in the system). The system is made up of the economic and administrative, *efficient* organization of actions, and all the rules and actions that derive from this organization. Ideally, the lifeworld and the system would form a society together, and the connection between them could be described in terms of exchange of money and power (e.g. these relations describe how labour is offered from the individual to the uses of the system, which, in return, provides the individual's income – and so, a person's private sphere becomes partly dominated by the system). (Habermas 1987, vol.2: 319–325.)

The latest development is the **colonization of the lifeworld by the system**. "The

communicative practice of everyday life is one-sidedly rationalized into a utilitarian lifestyle […]. As the private sphere is undermined […] by the economic system, so too is the public sphere by the administrative system. The bureaucratic disempowering and desiccation of spontaneous processes of opinion and will-formation expands the scope for engineering mass loyalty and makes it easier to uncouple political decision making from concrete, identity-forming contexts of life." (Habermas 1987, vol.2: 325.)

The system lacks the *reflexivity* of the communicative action. Political and economic decisions get disconnected from the lifeworld, but because it is in the lifeworld that communicative action is practised, this means that these decisions lose sight of what the best, common interest of the citizens is. In addition, the invasion of the system into areas of the lifeworld also brings about a "cultural impoverishment."

This unwelcome effect of the system stepping outside its ideal boundaries explains the state of the contemporary public sphere (already described in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*): it is a hollow sphere of representation and advertising that no longer truly legitimates the political domination of ruling parties:

> Rational dialogue between citizens, and between citizens and the state, is replaced by systemic and strategic exchanges of power. Citizens offer the state legitimacy (in the form of votes for parties and basic compliance with laws) in return for the benefits of the welfare state, whilst the state 'spends' its power in the form of the laws and policies it imposes upon citizens; always mindful of the need to win votes. (Crossley & Roberts 2004: 8.)

2.3 Civil society (in the theory of communicative action)

Habermas further elaborated the concept of the public sphere in the light of the lifeworld and the system in his 1996 book *Between Facts and Norms*. "[p]ublic sphere [is] a communication structure rooted in the lifeworld through the associational network of civil society," he writes, stressing that it is not a single institution or organization: "The public sphere can best be described 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 bundles of topically specified *public* opinions. Like the lifeworld as a whole, so, too, the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action." (Habermas 2004: 359–360.)

This definition points to another concept that is of great importance in trying to see the

public sphere as not an abstract, theoretical construct, but an empirically existing phenomenon. This concept is that of civil society. As Dahlgren puts it: "**[a]ll of civil society is not equivalent to the public sphere, but civil society constitutes the settings for the interactional dimension of the public sphere**" (1995: 151).

> Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. (Habermas 2004: 367.)

An important part of civil society is made up of the so-called "new social movements:" movements that are alarmed by the colonization of the lifeworld by the system[11], and that try to directly influence the political system and to revitalize and enlarge civil society and the public sphere. (Habermas 2004: 370; Crossley & Roberts 2004: 8.)

(The "democratizing potential" of the internet stems, in my view, partly from the fact that at least in theory it can help the organization of such new social movements.)

The spontaneity of the organization of civil society also gives an insight into what the single and unified public sphere means for Habermas. "Public sphere in practice" does not mean that public discourse is always, everywhere about the same issues. Different groups of people meet in different conditions and have different conversations; for example, the audience of a rock concert might not have anything in common with a think-tank of economists. But the different discourses of these different publics are "porous to one another," they all represent different aspects of the same basic issues: "the one text of 'the' public sphere […] is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context" (Habermas 2004: 374).

This is a much looser interpretation of the concept of the single public sphere than the one that could be understood from Habermas' earlier works. It also evades the modern vs post-modern debate: there is only one meaningful Public Sphere, but it doesn't mean an *exclusion* of other public spheres (unlike in the theory of the *bourgeois* public sphere), because 'the' Public Sphere is the complex cooperation of all the particular

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[11] "[...] the crushing of social groups, associations, and networks," the "indoctrination and the dissolution of cultural identities," the "suffocation of spontaneous public communication" (Habermas 2004: 369).

public spheres – and all of these public spheres are relevant (as long as they are intelligible to one another), but none of them represents 'the' Public Sphere in itself.

An institution that contributes immensely to the cooperation of the public spheres (as well as to the operation of the civil society and the state), is the mass media. Habermas remained uncertain about the effects of the mass media domination, but noted nevertheless that the media represents a certain information inequality, where a small group of people (media experts, programme directors and representatives of the press in general) can decide what topics the public spheres should focus on and discuss about (Habermas 2004: 377)[12]. This could also be seen as a sign of the decoupling of the lifeworld and the (business-oriented, economic) system. (See also Dahlgren 1995: 155.)

2.4. From the theory of public sphere to the theory of communicative action

As Malmberg (2006) points it out, the original theory of the bourgeois public sphere and the theory of communicative action could not be simply compared, given their difference in their approach and in their scope.

They could be put into perspective using Hegel's works as point of reference. The theory of the public sphere is institutionalist in its approach: it conceptualizes the public sphere as a separate institution, a distinct part in the model of society, along with the state, the civil society (here referring to the early, healthy capitalism as opposed to the feudal mode of production), and the family; based on Hegel's tripartite model of society presented in his late work "Elements of Philosophy of Right," originally published in 1821. In contrast, the theory of communicative action finds the source of legitimizing potential in the individual, more precisely in the individuals' universal faculty of language, and in the universally human ability of logical argument. Here, the concept of civil society is used in a different sense (see 2.3); and the starting point of the theory of communicative action is closer to the young Hegel's views. (Malmberg 2006.)

The gap between the two theories illustrates a shift in Habermas' attention, but this gap is by no means unbridgeable. As I pointed out in chapter 2.3, Habermas himself showed how the concept of public sphere could be linked, through the concept of civil society,

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[12] "The basic problem of political communication [is] managing a two-way process of communication flows between the professionalized mass media and the non-professional everyday actors. Ideally, both should be sensitive to the other" (Malmberg 2006: 12).

to that of communicative action. In this sense, the theory of communicative action extends the original idea of the public sphere, providing it with a background, explaining how the public sphere is rooted in the *lifeworld* and, consequently, how it is threatened by the invasion of the *system*. Nevertheless, in this thesis I will approach the research problem from the young Habermas' point of view. I now attempt to briefly explain the reason behind this choice.

In discussing how Habermas revised his theories about the public sphere in response to the more and more apparent role and ubiquity of mass media, Malmberg concludes that:

> […] maybe the media system has become over-complex in the sense that, given the immensity of its manifestations, nobody can with any certainty say what it includes. If this is so we, or any finite subject in the sense of Habermas' post-metaphysical philosophy, can never know what the people wants politically, save through the formal procedures of voting. Such an upshot would, however, threaten to collapse the basic idea of substantial democracy so pressing to Habermas. (Malmberg 2006: 21.)

But in my view, information overflow is not the result of the media system reaching new levels of complexity, rather, it is the result of the very *birth* of the media. From the moment that we can talk of "media," this word refers to a complex of information the totality of which nobody could ever grasp or process. In this respect, the 18th century was no different from today: if nowadays the theoretical possibility of getting to know to every single piece of the media output is even further out of touch, it doesn't mean that this task was ever performable in the first place – not even in the highly restricted settings that Habermas presents in his original work about the public sphere.

However, even if I don't agree with the findings of the idealistic "historical sociology" of the young Habermas, I think that certain elements of his theory are, indeed, valid in the age of the internet: mostly, I refer here to the assumption of his theory of the public sphere that it is possible to discursively create and manage political power.

This assumption is explicitly confirmed and explained by Habermas himself in his keynote speech held at the 2006 conference of the International Communication Association, in which he revisited the topic of the public sphere. The power structure of the public sphere is made up by *political*, *social*, *economic* and *media* power: it is in the interplay of these powers that issues of the political public sphere are framed and public opinion is crystallized. The public sphere is reflexive, meaning that all participants can

in theory influence both the issues that the public opinion deals with and the qualities of this public opinion. But it is only pseudo-democratic, because there are important inequalities of power between participants of the public sphere. (Habermas 2006.)
In Habermas' understanding, contemporary public sphere is but a "virtual stage" (sic), where in theory everybody can participate as well as spectate, but where exists a strong hierarchy, in which the "national quality press" is awarded the role of opinion leader (Habermas 2006: 19). The political public sphere is "dominated by the kind of mediated [mass-]communication that lacks the defining features of deliberation" (Habermas 2006: 8–9), and hence it is the mass media professionals that have the power to select, shape and *mediate* opinions (originating either from the political system or from the civil society) towards the broad and general public(s). However, in an ideal scenario, with an independence of the mass media and with the help of an inclusive civil society, deliberative democracy could still function properly, in spite of the unequal distribution of power to influence public opinion construction (Habermas 2006: 20). Thus, **in an ideal state of things, discursively created political power could be used to legitimate a democratic rule. But in a less-than ideal state of things, such power can also be used to attain or legitimate an undemocratic rule** – as, again, Habermas himself suggests in writing about the re-feudalization of the public sphere.

This latter line of thought can be traced back to the works of C. W. Mills. In his trilogy presenting the post-war society of the United States – *The New Man of Power*, *White Collar* and *The Power Elite* –, he warns of the dangers of a "new corporatism," referring to the blurring of the private and public spheres along the "war-economy"-related business interests of the elite. In such a corporatist society formal democracy is established, but the impeccable procedures of democracy merely cover for the lack of *substantial* democracy. This is possible because the power elite also heavily influences the mass media, which ends up manipulating people, who turn from a "community of [discursive] publics" into a "society of masses." (Eldridge 1983: 81–82.)
As Mills himself writes – six years before the publication of Habermas' *Strukturwandel*:

> Public relations and the official secret, the trivialising campaign and the terrible fact clumsily accomplished, are **replacing reasoned debate of political ideas** in the privately incorporated economy, the military

> ascendancy, and the political vacuum of modern America" (Mills 1959: 360–361, quoted in Eldridge 1983: 84. Emphasis added.)

Importantly, these thoughts seem to have been inspiring for newer generations of thinkers, too. Joseph Nye (2004: 5, quoted in Chouliaraki 2007: 1) named the discursively created, symbolic power "soft power," as opposed to the hard power relying on military and economic resources. Graham and Luke (2007), starting from the concept of soft power, took the Habermasian idea of refeudalized public sphere one step further, describing contemporary Western society as that of "neofeudal corporatism."

According to Graham and Luke, "the currently dominant [in the authors' understanding: Western] form of social organization is 'designed' in a loose sense to produce and support high-tech, massive, globally operative, corporately owned military institutions" (2007: 27). They also point to the blurring of lines between the concepts of private and public ("The density and reach of corporatist mediations make it impossible to delineate militaristic mediations along private-public lines, or within that, between […] general activity and specifically military activity" (2007: 28)), and they conclude in affirming that "[t]he feudal spirit […] has re-emerged" (2007: 33).

It is at least strange that Graham and Luke do not even mention, let alone reference, Habermas or Mills. But in any case they show an example of how their approach still lives on. And, although I contest the validity of Graham and Luke's model of neofeudal corporatism[13], I agree with their points that there is, in contemporary Western society, a discursively created imbalance of power, and that this imbalance of power could be repaired discursively. Therefore, while keeping in mind the possible further implications of the theory of communicative action, I will not examine how this latter's supposed universal rationality is related to or manifested through the communication services of the internet. **Rather, I will examine how these various online services will help or hinder a democratic, discursive, "counter-feudal" public, using the young Habermas' institutionalist approach to the public sphere**.

Before that, however, I briefly present the most important strands of criticism Habermas received, because these have important implications for how to analyse the role of the

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[13] Parallelling today's economy with that of the middle ages is interesting, but without even mentioning the role of land (cf. *feudum*) in the latter, or trying to find its equivalent in the former, the theory seems somewhat flawed to me.

internet. In short, critiques suggest a growing variety and uncertainty of social relations, and the growing importance of the ever so swiftly changing communication.

2.5 Critical reflections on Habermas

Based on the essay of Garnham (1992), the main strands of criticism towards Habermas' original work (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere)* could be summed up as follows. First, the theory of the bourgeois public sphere is too restrictive: Habermas reserves the original public sphere for educated, property-owning, affluent, white males of the bourgeoisie, excluding other social groups (most notably, women, and the working class) from taking part in the democracy. (It might be that it was indeed the bourgeoisie that played the most important part in securing the institution of democracy in the first nation states. But even if it is so, Habermas errs in implicitly suggesting that such a state of affairs was fully democratic, which it wasn't, at least not according to the modern understanding of ideal representative democracy.) Second, the original theory presented an overly idealized picture – in fact, the model of the bourgeois public sphere seemed to combine, in a vague manner, idealistic description and factual analysis. Its idealism is manifested chiefly in Habermas' exaggerated faith in human reason and rationality, and his negligence of the distortions that are inherent in the operations of the media, as well as of irrational or restrictive (possibly malevolent) acts from members of the public sphere. (See also Hartley 1996: 67 and Dahlgren 1995: 152, as well as chapter 2.5.)

Third, in striking contrast with this belief in reason, Habermas also seems to assume that in certain conditions people easily suspend critical thinking altogether, and become blind subjects of domination (by the ruling political party, by the media, by the advertising of the culture industry). In reality, "[p]eople never passively consume images but actively and consistently debate and discuss everyday dilemmas, however small, within their day-to-day lives" (Crossley & Roberts 2004: 8).

In the theory of communicative action Habermas seemed to tackle the problem of historical situatedness and the exclusivity of the bourgeois public sphere, claiming that rationality is inherent in all speech acts, and it was because of the specific historical circumstances that the bourgeoisie happened to be in the position to actualize this

potential rationality for the first time. This theory also received ample critical attention. It has been argued, most importantly, that the Habermasian ideal speech model leaves out of consideration a large number of factors that might seem irrelevant in theory, but which do affect communication in practice. One of these factors is the semiotic quality of language – one of the basic instruments of communication. Any given language uses signs to convey information, but the meaning of these signs will never be stable. It will always be relational, and dependent on those who send and those who receive the piece of information in question. Even in an undistorted communicative situation, when the participants speak the same language (!), are members of the same culture (!), can hear and understand one another perfectly, and are physically unrestricted in their communication, misunderstandings can occur, because of the uncertain relationship between what is being said, what is *meant* to be said and how the message is *interpreted*. Habermas neglects this aspect of the language, supposing that in an ideal speech situation, participants will say exactly what they mean, and this will be interpreted exactly the intended way by the other parties. Non-verbal communication does not appear in his model, either. (Dahlgren 1995: 102–103; see Lukes 1982.)

Habermas also downplays the importance of the human psyche. He neglects the arational or irrational modes of communication, even though in practice it seems possible to achieve intersubjectivity (mutual understanding) through these modes of discourse as well. He is also accused of the "linguisticization of the unconscious," i. e. that he seems to forget about the Freudian unconscious or even physiological – bodily – drives such as hunger or sexual desire. "Television and other manifestations of our mass-mediated semiotic environment largely sidestep communicative rationality and employ other discursive modes, but we would […] understand how, if our analytic tools were grounded on Habermas' notion of the unconscious," writes Dahlgren (1995: 106).

Finally, considering that the subject of this paper is the internet, a peculiarly interesting strand of critique refers to the physical setting of Habermas' model of communication: notably that it concerns direct, face-to-face communication, where participants can immediately reflect on one another's claims, or ask for clarification. This is not how texts delivered by the mass media are consumed, which might not seem that big a problem, because it is not in the primary consumption of texts, but in the discussion that

follows afterwards, that communicative action can manifest itself (through rational, critical debate over the piece of media text). But here the internet presents a problem, for it is a space where it is perfectly possible to discuss texts of the media using the very same discursive methods as the ones used for the consumption of the texts: for example, one can read an article in an on-line magazine and immediately add their own comments, which will become part of the original article. The theory of communicative action might prove too theoretical to tackle situations like this.

2.5.1 Key features of modernity

There is also a line of criticism that is tied to the changing – practical – circumstances of the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century – that is, with the changing settings of modernity. (Arguably, these arguments or settings are not entirely "new," but they were given weight by the technological inventions of the 20th and 21st century.)

Habermas starts from the basis that the "unfulfilled project" of the Enlightenment can be finished: with rationality, reason, innovation and progress is possible, and this progress will eventually lead to the realization of freedom, equality, justice and comfort all across (in solidarity, fraternity with) the society. His stance is that of modernity, but the modern paradigm might not be able to accommodate (describe or explain) the changes that have been taking place in the past few decades at an immense speed. Dahlgren (1995) and Lash (2002) sum up in similar ways these changes of "late modernity."

According to Dahlgren (1995: 80), the three key features of late modernity are the **pluralization** of microsocial worlds and identities, the **disembedding** of social relations, and the **mediazation** of the semiotic environment.

Lash on the other hand emphasizes the importance of technology in the condition of late Western modernity: in his understanding, the modern way of life is decidedly **technological** in that **people "cannot achieve sociality in the absence of technological systems"** (Lash 2002: 15–16). The changes described both by him and Dahlgren point in the same direction: towards a **growing variety and uncertainty of social relations, as well as the growing importance and the ever faster change of communication**. These conditions of the late modernity fit perfectly into post-modern theories, too (notably, post-modernity does not "follow" modernity in a way that we could say modernity is over; these two paradigms exists parallel to one another).

Post-modern theoreticians such as Hartley (1992, 1996) or Fraser (1992) suggest that the idea of a single public sphere can no longer be valid in a fragmented, information and communication-driven, immensely varied Western world – partly because this also incorporates social groups that function following non-Western norms, standards, customs and cultures. The post-modern argument proposes that communication is not always possible among various public spheres, because these might be situated in completely different settings and using completely different frames of reference – and this is where they oppose the theory of the communicative action, which supposes that there is an inherent rationality in *every* speech act, and that rational reasoning could bridge the gap between any given intelligent participants of a social interaction.

Fraser (1992: 123) introduced the concept of "subaltern counterpublics:" these are alternative discursive spheres where members of various alternative publics discuss issues they are concerned about. The existence of such counterpublics implies that there is no single "common interest" of the population; the only interest that could be formulated is that of justice and equality: all of the common interests that are hammered out in the various different public spheres should be given weight in political decisions, otherwise political domination cannot be legitimate. Subaltern counterpublics are also important because it is in their respective public spheres that alternative groups can maintain and cultivate their identities (for it is in relation to others, that concepts of identity and alterity gain their meaning). (Fraser 1992, 1995.)

However, the post-modern view, to some extent, can indeed be reconciled with that of Habermas – see chapter 2.3.

2.5.2 A side-note on the Madisonian concept of democracy

If we accept the Habermasian understanding of public sphere, and the theoretical (if utopistic) possibility of an ideal, unobstructed version of this sphere, we might be tempted to say that more information is always better than less information, and more contact between the parties involved in discussion is always better than less contact. Of course the underlying hypothesis of this paper already implies otherwise: more information is **potentially** better, but this potential is only realized if the pieces of information in question meet certain criteria, concerning availability, credibility, accuracy, validity, usefulness etc. But if these conditions are right, then it is not within

the concept of the internet as a huge noticeboard[14], that the problem is.

But it is worth mentioning the so-called Madisonian concept of democracy[15], for it is even more critical towards the beneficial effects of more available information; and it is critical to them in ways completely different from those of Habermas. For Madison, the biggest enemy of a well-established, representative democracy is the formation of "factions" within the supposedly democratic representative bodies of the people, along minority interests. The birth of factions can be tackled by an appropriate design of the deliberative institutions. In the Madisonian model, deficiencies in our capabilities of communication might be beneficial, because they hinder the reconciliation of interests outside the framework of the official design, supposed to safeguard the impartiality of the institution. (Applbaum 2002: 26–27).

And from this point of view, the internet is rather a curse than a blessing, even if it has built-in "checking mechanisms" (Thompson 2002: 34). "The Internet [sic] does not shrink the number of interests, but precisely those aspects of interactive communication that thrill the direct democrats make the identification and organization of factious majorities more likely" (Applbaum 2002: 27). When evaluating the discursive potential of the internet, it is useful to keep in mind these reservations.

2.6 Habermas and the public sphere – a short summary

Habermas' theories about the public sphere, as presented in his works (Habermas 1987, 1989, 2004), can be summed up as follows.

The bourgeois public sphere was the first ever historical example of the actualization of the emancipatory potential of communicative action. The bourgeois public sphere could, for the first time in history, produce a discursively formulated common opinion, reflecting the best interests of the citizens. Referring to these interests, the public sphere could legitimate political domination in the first democracies. It also illustrated that democracies cannot exist without a discursive public. However, the bourgeois public sphere was also erroneous in being limited, restrictive and exclusive.

The public sphere today is / has been refeudalized, turning once again into an empty

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[14] For this metaphor credit is due to my supervisor Tarmo Malmberg.

[15] After James Madison, fourth president of the United States and a key figure behind its constitution.

public sphere of representation. There is an increasing distance between spheres of power and spheres of private life, therefore the common best interest of the citizens is increasingly neglected, and the formulation of a meaningful public opinion is hindered. This process can be seen as the increasing domination of the non-reflective, efficiency-oriented logic of the economic and political system, over the communicatively organized, potentially rational (and thus egalitarian) lifeworld. However, new social movements are trying to counter the colonization of the lifeworld by the system.

The interactional part of the public sphere (in other words, where public sphere *happens* in practice) is the civil society. Permeating both the civil society and all the other social spaces is the mass media, which represents an inequality in information, but the effects of which on public sphere are uncertain, ambivalent.

In the previous part of the thesis I outlined certain strands of criticism against Habermas. In spite of the arguable deficiencies of his original model, in this thesis I still plan to take advantage of his original, institutionalist approach, because of its implied model of discursively created (or "soft") power. However, I am to take into consideration the criticism offered especially by Dahlgren and Lash (who describe changing and more and more apparent circumstances of late modernity that propose uncertainty and possible new configurations for social relations), and by Applbaum and Thompson, who point out the differences in approach between the Habermasian and Madisonian concept of democracy.

2.7 Culture industry – theory and critique

The theory of the culture industry has been developed by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two philosophers that escaped the Nazi Germany for being persecuted because of their Jewish origin. It was most probably the booming capitalism and increased capitalization of the entertainment industry of the United States that inspired their ideas; main arguments of their original theory can be summed up as follows (all references to Adorno and Horkheimer 1999):

Culture – under the umbrella term "entertainment" – has become a line of business. This fact has even become its own ideology, as if it offered an excuse for "the rubbish [it] deliberately produces." The operations of this particular line of business are tied to economies of scale (it is profitable to employ technologies of mass production, and

cater for the largest audience possible, instead of producing smaller amounts of products that are possibly better crafted). Culture has also become tied to, and reliant on, other industries, such as the electricity industry or banking and finance.

The culture industry looks at audiences in a simplifying way. The masses are categorized according to a few basic characteristics (such as age and gender), and these audience groups are then treated as homogeneous: each of these groups demonstrates a largely similar taste in culture. These different tastes can be satisfied by following the rulebook of various well-established styles. In order to avoid risks, texts do follow these rules blindly; therefore in the end all of the cultural products resemble one another, with apparent features by which the audiences can easily identify which style or genre they represent: there are "kids' movies," "detective stories" and "love stories," for example, and each of these cater for a different group of audience, following the slight variations of a basic stylistic concept. Parts of the texts are interchangeable; one unimportant detail is often magnified in order to act as an "original" or "distinctive" feature: such detail could be the hair style of a star, or a catchphrase of a character; these superficial differences do not affect the basic similarity of the structure and themes of the texts.

Culture industry affects an increasing part of everyday life, and thanks to technological development (note that the theory was originally published in the mid-forties, and consider how much technology has developed since then!), there is an increasing, seamless convergence between real life and cultural texts. This is how the cultural industry promises an "escape from the drudgery" of everyday life, and then it continuously cheats us of this promise. Satisfaction gained by the consumption of the products of cultural industry is always temporary and illusory, because the industry needs customers that are always hungry for new (of the same).

The theory of the culture industry must influenced Habermas when he conceptualized the contemporary public sphere as the public sphere of advertising: he is speaking of a "dumbing down" of products of the culture industry, so as they are easily accessed by the biggest possible audiences. "Mass culture [...] achieves increased sales by adapting to the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relatively little education, rather than through guidance of an enlarged public towards the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance" (Habermas 1989: 165).

However, he also noted how the capitalization of culture helped the access to valuable, deep, substantial works: "Through paperback series printed in large editions, a relatively small stratum of readers educated or ready to be educated [...] have high quality literature made available to them" (Habermas 1989: 166–167).

Adorno and Horkheimer – members of the Frankfurt School – followed the ideology of what in hindsight is labelled as "Western Marxism"; a theoretical complex trying to revise marxism, and offer an alternative interpretation to it (Anderson 1984: 25).
While they critically revised Marxism, they remained critical to capitalism, too, which is one of the underlying straits of thought of their essay – originally having appeared as part of the volume *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* According to Anderson, the basic argument of *Dialectic...* "effectively equated North American liberalism and German fascism" (1984: 34). In any case, Adorno's concept of art, a key topic of his studies, might help better understanding his arguments against the culture industry.
In Adorno's understanding – and in my rather simplified presentation –, autonomous art is the sphere in which internal tensions and contradictions of a society as a whole are reflected upon. This, however, can only be done if the work of art in itself has no primary social function, because art can only point out the said tensions and contradictions if it stays outside of society: "There is nothing in art that's directly social. [...] If any social function can be ascribed to art at all, it is the function to have no function" (Adorno 1972: 322). Autonomous art must signal that it is something strange, something special, something out of the ordinary:

> One decisive reason why art works, at least those that refuse to surrender to propaganda, are lacking in social impact is that they have to give up the use of those communicative means that would make them palatable to a larger public. If they do not, they become pawns in the all-encompassing system of communication. (Adorno 1972: 344.)

The scornful attitude towards "communication" is telling, and points to a key difference of thought between Habermas (belonging to the second generation of the Frankfurt School) and his mentors. Adorno and Horkheimer represented a view in which everyday communication cannot have an emancipatory or legitimizing role in modern society, because various public uses of the language – as in news journalism – degraded it and "deprived it of faculties capable of giving expression to personal experience"

(Malmberg 2006: 7)[16]. Instead of everyday communication, then, it is through art that is an "avenue through which freedom could speak" (Malmberg 2006: 7).

According to Adorno, the appreciation of art requires a cognitive faculty; to understand the contradictions it presents, and to realize that the resolution of these contradictions must bring about changing society itself (and changing it for the better). The Freudian interpretation of art, or the "disinterested pleasure" thesis of Kant, or the theory of sensual pleasure and pain – these ideas, according to Adorno, are limited, restricted in their understanding what art is (Adorno 1972: 6–22). And this, importantly, draws a dividing line between art and entertainment.

Entertainment cannot produce autonomous art: "[t]he autonomy of works of art […] is tendentially eliminated by the culture industry" (Adorno 2001: 99). In fact, entertainment has nothing to do with art at all, even though the two are presented as synonyms by the culture industry. What is important in art is at best secondary in the capitalization of the culture industry. Consumers of this industry are not exposed to artistically articulated representations of tensions within the society, but to a momentary experience of mild amusement: "[t]he culture industry [...] fills empty time with more emptiness. It does not even produce false consciousness, but takes great pains to leave everything as it is" (Adorno 1972: 348).

In other words, Adorno and Horkheimer see the capitalization of the culture industry as an attack against the only sphere of life capable of addressing the most important problems of a society. This explains the vigour with which they phrase their criticism.

Since the 1940's, the basic assumption of the theory of the culture industry have been questioned; most notably by a group of French sociologists (cf. Miège 1987, quoted in Hesmondhalgh 2002). In their view, Adorno and Horkheimer followed an oversimplified approach in their evaluation of the culture industry (which partly stemmed from the fact that they couldn't have possibly *experienced* culture industry as it has continued to develop under the course of years).

Miège (1989) summarizes the limitations of Adorno's and Horkheimer's models in three

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[16] "What is called 'communication' today is the adaptation of spirit to [...] commodity fetishism" (Adorno 1972: 109). Both in his original theory about the bourgeois public sphere and his ideas about communicative action, Habermas presents a markedly different view.

key points. First, he claims that Adorno didn't clearly see how much artistic practice itself had been changed and transformed by major technological innovations (Miège 1989: 10). (I don't agree with this line of criticism by Miège. Adorno, especially at the time of writing the original essay, could not have been aware of all the possibilities improving technology would later provide for artists, but as I understand he had very clear ideas about the *development*, the life, death and changing nature of *art itself* (Adorno 1972: 4–6), and he saw technology as a sphere in which artists were looking for new ways to create autonomous art works: "[t]he infiltration by technology into art is caused [partly] by the objective situation of art, which is that authoritative art works are becoming more and more difficult to bring off successfully" (Adorno 1972: 87).)

Second, Miège claims that "[r]eference to ‘cultural industry’ in the singular misleads one into thinking that we are faced with a unified field, where the various elements function within a single process. The phenomena – it is thought – are the same in literature, music, painting or in the radio" (Miège 1989: 10). This unified picture might fit the ideological, theoretical complex of Western Marxism, but it fails to take into account a handful of very important practical factors, stemming from the fact the cultural production – just as any other industrial activity – is a complex process, with several different variants pertaining to various branches within the industry.

One way to differentiate between various branches in the culture industry would be to examine which one of the three contradicting commercial logics they follow. This could be the *logic of publishing* (concerning books, records and films, and other lines of business where customers buy the "right of enjoyment" of isolated, individual works), the *logic of flow* (concerning radio and TV, and lines of business in general where producers create content so as to build an audience and profit from advertising), and lastly the *logic of the written press* (which can be seen as a combination of the first two logics). (Miège 1989: 146–148.)

Adorno himself was aware that the use of the term "culture industry" might be misleading, hence he suggested that "[...] the expression 'industry' is not to be taken too literally. It refers to the standardization of the thing itself – such as that of the Western, familiar to every movie-goer – and to the rationalization of distribution techniques," but "individual forms of production are nevertheless maintained" (Adorno 2001: 100–101). There is a difference of scale between the approaches of Miège and Adorno; the latter

describes the situation of the entertainment industry by a model rooted in philosophy, attacking the values and principles along which this industry works: it might very well be that there are different "logics" at work, but they all follow the idea of capitalization, and they all are against autonomous art.

Finally, according to Miège, the third main deficiency of Adorno's and Horkheimer's theory is that they expressed "greater interest in markets and in commodities than in the industry" – i.e. they reduced it to its technological components and methods of mass production, and in doing so, they failed to understand the limitations of the capitalization process of the culture industry (Miège 1989: 11). In other words, capitalization is not an unstoppable or infallible process, and thus it wouldn't possibly be able to abolish or completely degenerate autonomous art. This is finally a point of criticism where the pro and contra arguments stand on the same ground; as Adorno noted in 1975, there was no scientific evidence that could have proven beyond doubt the detrimental effects of the culture industry on society, but "it can be assumed without hesitation that steady drops hollow the stone, especially since the system of the culture industry […] tolerates hardly any deviation" (Adorno 2001: 105).

Further criticism concerns the practical contradictions that surface when the philosophical approach of Horkheimer and Adorno is translated into the language of cultural studies. Longhurst (1996: 11), for example, examines the actual production process of a commodified piece of culture, and points out that even if the "functional" part of the cultural product can be mass produced, this does not necessarily mean that the "textual" part of it can also be mass produced (e.g. vinyl or plastic discs *can* be mass-produced, but the *music* that they carry on themselves, *cannot*[17]).
Critiques of the original theory also hold that the industrialization of culture also resulted in "exciting new directions and innovations" (Hesmondhalgh 2002: 15, see also Longhurst 1996: 12). Genres have become fragmented into an extensive array of sub-genres (saying that *The Who* represents, under the folder "rock," the same music as *Nirvana* would be an oversimplification), and the development of technology made the

[17] Even if there are tentative steps in this direction, see The Economist (2006).

production of altogether new types of cultural products possible (cf. Miège 1989: 10).

In addition, critiques of Adorno's and Horkheimer's original theory have opposed the view that audiences would consist of brainless masses, who can forever be fooled by the culture industry with shallow, meaningless cultural products. Even if the culture industry might try to do so, cultural markets are the place of a continuous struggle, and the relationship between producers and customers in this industry is at best *ambivalent* (Hesmondhalgh 2002: 16–17).

In summary, a critical review of Adorno's and Horkheimer's theory sees the term "culture industries" (in the plural) more suitable than "culture industry" (in the singular), because the phenomena that it refers to are *complex*, *ambivalent* and *contested*. Culture industries today cannot be described simply by deploring everything they produce as output, as it also would be a mistake to suppose a general, overarching, all-encompassing ideology behind every single aspect of these industries, serving but one purpose: capitalist domination.

This of course does not mean that capitalist domination could not be one of the purposes, should one suppose that the culture industry is a single entity following the business interests of a “power elite.” For sure, industries involved in the production of cultural products seem to be capable of helping the discursive construction of legitimizing, soft power. According to Chouliaraki, this happens on two levels.

First, she claims that all political speech acts are also part of the culture industry: "political discourse, even when it is formulated as a parliamentary address, is reflexively (though not necessarily consciously) designed in ways that appeal to broader contexts and audiences" (Chouliaraki 2007: 3). Political discourse anticipates its dissemination in the media.

But, second, it is perhaps even more important how politics uses primarily cultural products – products of the entertainment industry! –, because "[t]he most effective work of legitimisation takes place through leisure and seemingly innocent entertainment" (Chouliaraki 2007: 4). Graham and Luke cite the example of 1986 action movie *Top Gun* as having "prepared the American people for the Gulf War" (2007: 28), while Machin and van Leeuwen (2007) suggest that Ridley Scott’s 2001 movie *Black Hawk Down*, and the computer game of the same title, was used for similar purposes, helping the legitimization of both past and future instants of American military intervention.

This leads us to two strands of questions to be asked about the internet and its effect on the cultural public sphere. The first strand concerns the technological possibilities the ‘net offers in the creation and dissemination of cultural products, and the second line of inquiry should deal with the possibility of the internet contributing to the discursive creation of power and disguising it as (high) culture or (popular) entertainment.

This approach differs from the one followed by Adorno and Horkheimer. My findings will neither confirm nor refute their claims, because these latter are strongly tied to a Western Marxist approach in the background, and to the concept of autonomous art as an emancipatory force in the foreground. Their claims should be tried and tested in an analysis focusing on the nature and quality of modern art, or the effects on this quality by capitalized culture industry. But such an aesthetic analysis I cannot undertake to attempt in this paper.

3 Conceptualizing the internet

That Habermas (2006: 9) downplays the importance of the internet in redemocratizing the public sphere is shown in the way he addressed the question in a footnote attached to his keynote speech at the ICA conference. In the speech itself, he examined the normative theory of deliberative democracy and a model of public sphere in it, in which model he attributed a key role to the mass media, and especially the national quality newspapers, which would serve as pillars of opinion formation in the public sphere. In contrast, the only positive development he attributes to the internet is that of undermining the censorship of authoritative regimes.

> In the context of liberal regimes, however, the online debates of web users tend instead to **lead to the fragmentation of large mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics.** The rise of millions of fragmented chat-rooms across the world endangers only political communication *within* established public spheres, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of print media, e.g., national newspapers and magazines, which are the pillars of national public spheres. (Habermas 2006: 9, emphasis added.)

Habermas (2006: 9) goes so far as saying that online communication had a "parasitic" role insofar as it could only exist feeding upon the traditional media institution. But "grassroots" online communication cannot significantly alter the discourse that is created by media professionals; it might help a larger number of opinions to come to daylight but it cannot decide which issues are relevant and how these issues are framed.

This view of Habermas was criticized e.g. by Bruns, an advocate of online communicative cooperation. Bruns (2007) claims that the example Habermas uses to illustrate the insignificance of online communities is misleading. In his view, there are "many citizen news and commentary projects which can […] be identified all over the web" (Bruns 2007), that sprung to life independent of the mainstream media.

Addressing the issue of the fragmentation of the public sphere, Bruns underlines the internet's inherent ability to connect different discussion groups, blogs or any other homepage via the use of hyperlinks. "To speak of [online audiences] as fragmented and isolated ignores or rejects the reality that especially online, individual publics are multiply connected both implicitly through shared membership and explicitly through a

network of hyperlinks connecting postings right across the boundaries of individual fora" (Bruns 2007). In his view, **an egalitarian decentralization of access does not necessarily fragment debates,** because there are effective quality control mechanisms built in the online discussion forums. Information overload has not arrived: "as networked information has grown, so have the tools available for making sense of it" (Bruns 2007).

The pessimism of Habermas and the enthusiasm of Bruns provide some kind of a background to the analytical part of this thesis. I will examine certain services of the internet in trying to produce evidence either in Habermas' or Bruns' favour. In order to do so, first I will attempt to conceptualize the internet from various points of view, so as to clarify which questions I should ask in the first place.

The internet is, on one hand, just a bunch of 1s and 0s running around in pieces of wire and on microwaves in the ether; on the other hand, of course, something way more complex. It could be described from numerous points of view, and I chose Dahlgren's analytical topology (1995: 11–23; the topology synthesizes ideas by Garnham (1992), Peters (1993), Fraser (1992) and Thompson (1990) among others)), to provide a useful and multi-faceted, structured description of the internet, this global computer network.

In this approach, any given public sphere can be examined along four dimensions: *media institutions*, *media representation*, *social structures* and *sociocultural interaction*. What these dimensions refer to can best be explained by four sets of questions. These questions, in their original use, refer to the public sphere as such, not the internet, but I find it useful to also adapt them to the internet specifically, not the least because this way we might get a better understanding of what the internet, from the sociological point of view, is, and what it is not. The four sets of questions are as follows:

1. What institutions belong to the media, and what does their organization, financing, regulation look like? Of special importance in the case of the internet: *is the internet a media institution at all? And who owns the internet?*
2. What is represented in various media and how? What kind of information or knowledge is to be found on the internet, *provided that the internet is in fact part of the media?*

3. What is the social structure of the public sphere – where, in which social institutions does it exist (or happen)? Is it centralized, or are there multiple, but equally important public spheres? Is there coherence, a "goodness of fit" between the public sphere(s) and the political entities that they might influence?
4. How does public sphere, in the communication of its members, *come to being?* How does it happen, what are the peculiarities of the interactions that are part of the public sphere, and how are they different from interactions that are *not* part of the public sphere (if such a question makes sense at all)?

This last question, enquiring into the features of the sociocultural interaction within the public sphere, can further be broken down into three areas of analytical concern: these are the *discursive*, *spatial* and *communal* dimensions of interaction.

The *discursive* dimension refers to what people are talking about when they interact in the public sphere, the *spatial* dimension of interaction registers where and how people meet when they interact. The *communal* dimension of social interactions refers to the "nature of social bonds between citizens." I will examine these dimensions one by one.

3.1 The internet as media institution – the internet as business

Is the internet a media institution? If it is, should not the telephone be considered as media, too? After all, the telephone is also a device that makes the exchange of information possible between parties that are physically far away from one another...

Clearly there is something wrong with the telephone analogy: the internet by today came to mean much more than just the connection between computers; it is a very complex package of services, of which the multimedia pages of the world wide web are just one example. But even if it was not so, the internet could not be compared to the telephone networks because unlike these latter, the internet can be used as a device of mass communication, too.

Therefore, yes, the internet is media in the sense that it is a "transmitter of meanings" between an addresser and an addressee (Hartley 1996: 3).

On the other hand, the internet would still exist and fulfil an important task if no messages were transmitted on it, just as smaller computer networks can function, allowing computers to share their resources such as storage or computing capacity. And

even when it acts as a transmitter of messages, it is significantly different from other, traditional media. In the case of the press, the television and the radio, the basic technology seems much more intertwined with the message and the *use* of the appliance itself: there are in fact very limited uses of a TV set or a radio appliance (disregarding the extreme cases when they act as, say, a stand for a vase or a piece of art), but the ways people can use the internet are numerous. Some of these uses involve the role of a clear "producer" of texts, just like in the case of traditional media, but some do not: for example, one could use the internet solely for the purpose of e-mail. If we look at the internet from the point of usability, it is media and non-media at the same time.

We get to the same conclusion if we look at the internet from the point of view of Nieminen's theory of hegemony (2000: 126). Although the internet might not "act as an instrument in competition between different elite groups," and it is certainly not "part of this competition itself, pursuing the interests of […] the media elite," because it is not *owned* by such an elite, but it does "provide the public a more or less pluralistic view of society, reflecting differing interests and rendering items for identification for different social and political groups." Put shortly, the internet does represent some of the qualities of whatever media is, and it seems to have shed others.

It is this ambiguous nature that would explain the term "new media," as sometimes used in reference to the internet. In any case, I think it's important to understand that the ambivalence concerning the internet stems partly from an ambivalence of definitions: while the term *internet* originally only referred to the actual physical components of the network, nowadays it is used (also in this paper!) as a synonym for all the *services* that became available on the network. If we speak of the network itself, it cannot be media any more than a piece of telephone wire, but if we speak of the services, then the internet can indeed act as a media (and it also can have other uses).

In any case, along the lines of Dahlgren's first dimension of analysis, the following question could be asked: **is the examined service of the internet part of a commercial or public service media institution? If so, which parties have a vested interest in running the service in question?**

With reference to Habermas' (2006: 9) argument, it must also be examined to what extent particular online services *rely "parasitically" on* traditional media in their discussion and setting of agendas.

3.1.1 Common and advocacy domains of the media

As I noted under chapter 1.2, I try in this paper not to take a stand in the modern vs post-modern debate, but merely describe in what ways the internet changes public discourse, and what this possibly means for the existence of public spheres, in the light of various theories. This is in fact a similar attitude to the one by Dahlgren, who proposes the theory of the common / advocacy domains of the media not as solution to the modern – post-modern discussion, but a model that could be applied in the practical circumstances of our (Western) everyday lives.

Dahlgren (1995: 155–159) underlines the importance of media in contemporary societies (cf. the trend of *mediazation* in late modernity). The media is a line of business, and it has to face technological barriers that prevent interactivity or effective feedback from the part of media consumers[18]. This leads to a problem: "those media institutions which are of most significance for the majority of citizens are […] to a great extent beyond the reach of citizen practices and interventions. That is the rub: this duality is a central source of tension within the public sphere" (Dahlgren 1995: 155).

One way of improving this would be to conceptualize the media as consisting of **common and advocacy domains**. The common domain is "where we find for the most part the dominant media, which ideally provide information, debate and opinion for all members of society," in an impartial and considerate way (mindful of the difference in interests of various social groups). It is also in the common domain that citizens can cultivate their common identity of being fellow citizens, members of the democracy. Reiterating a thought of Garnham, Dahlgren underlines that "[a]n important criterion and assumption here is the relative goodness of fit between the geographic boundaries of political entities and the reach of the media to which they correspond" (Dahlgren 1995: 156). This idea, as I will present it later, might just be the key to explain the inability of the internet to actualize its democratizing potential.

The advocacy domain, on the other hand, would be "the setting for all citizens who wish to pursue special interests, and generate group-based cultural and political interpretations of society." It would consists of "time and space made available within

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[18] Economies of scale prevent media companies from providing personal messages and considering the opinion of every single media consumer in their broadcast – in the case of conventional media, that is.

the dominant media" as well as "of a plurality of smaller 'civic media' from political parties, interest groups, movements, organizations and networks," and it would provide a communicational channel to alternative public spheres – subaltern counterpublics – to cultivate their internal discussion and, importantly, to bridge the gap between different public spheres. "The net result would be […] multiperspective journalism, which would help counter the prevailing understanding that there is only one version of what constitutes truth or reality and only one way to talk about it." (Dahlgren 1995: 156.)

Dahlgren also notes that "the advocacy status of civic media means that they will be portraying the world in ways which may differ from the canons of professional journalism" (1995: 159), and when we think of, say, blogs, we might be tempted to see the internet already as *the real* advocacy domain within media – it is certainly a question worth looking into: if the internet can, from certain points of view, be seen as part of the media, can it also be the scene of an **advocacy domain of the media?**

3.1.2 Questions of censorship and regulation

One aspect of the legal regulation of the internet is the complexity involved in this endeavour: the internet spans over borders, and therefore presents a situation for which the law of nation states seems outdated. Nation states cannot effectively control the internet (unless they decide not to allow it at all or to block its physical infrastructure), but there is no trans-national institution or organization that could enforce global laws over it. (That is to say, if such global laws could, in theory, be drafted.) In this thesis, I only plan to brush upon the subject of law, partly because of the complexity of the issue, partly because of my severely limited competence in legal matters.

Another aspect however, that I will examine, is the emancipatory potential of the internet, in states where the real-life public sphere has to tackle censorship.

3.2 The dimension of media representation

Following Dahlgren's topology, the second dimension public spheres could be measured by is that of media representation. If we established that the internet is potentially a media institution, we can also ask *what* and *how* is represented on the internet, what kind of information, knowledge is to be found there?

It is probably impossible to give even just an approximative account of the content that

is provided on the internet; the inevitable trend seems to be that "if you can't find information about it on the internet, it doesn't exist" (and yet again I'd like to draw attention to the Western-embeddedness of this point of view, as mentioned in chapter 1.4). Precisely because it is so easy to become a producer of content on the internet, either in a "casual" way (i. e. taking part in discussion forums or wikis) or "institutionally" (i. e. running a website or providing content in another regular and structured way), it is not surprising that information is to be uploaded to the net about an ever increasing part of the "real life" (inverted commas due to the fact that there are phenomena that are 'real' only on the internet but cannot exist in what is usually termed real life).

Importantly, some of this huge and constantly changing mass of information is made up of advertising. And sometimes it is not clear at all whether or not a piece of content on the internet is actually advertising, or something else. The internet is about possibilities and breaking down barriers: texts can easily serve purposes of advertising and entertainment, or advertising and education at the same time. (See Currie 2007.)

Similarly, the dividing line between fact and opinion is easily blurred on the internet. Not necessarily in the case of the on-line representation of conventional media (e.g. the homepage of a newspaper or a television company), but in the case of the works of self-appointed journalists, who are not necessarily forced by any set of conventions, rules or obligations that bound media professionals.

In connection to this, there is also a certain degree of uncertainty considering the reliability of information found on the internet. The precise source of an information might be unknown, either in the sense that it is *completely* unknown, or in the sense that the internet identity of the source can be traced (as in a discussion forum, it is obvious who (and at exactly what time!) said something), but the internet identity gives to us no clue about the "real-life" identity of the person who provided the piece of information in question. (Naturally, it might be that even the if the real-life identity of the author of a certain text is known, it conveys no information about the reliability of the text, should that particular author be unknown to the reader.) With such uncertain identities, it might prove more difficult to decide whether or not a source can be trusted than in real life, and in communication situations taking place outside the internet.

The three trends that could, in my view, sum up the topic of *what is available* on the

internet are: **abundance**, **uncertainty** and, indeed, **democracy**, in the sense that every user is a potential content-creator on the internet (and this also means that the CEO or PR-manager of a company can pretend to speak as an ordinary Tom, Dick or Harry, about (for? against?) their own company).

As for the *how*-part of the question of representation, again, we have to face a sphere of numerous possibilities. "Texts" on the internet might just mean texts – series of words, received either in the form of an on-line chat, an e-mail, or in a more structured way, but, as mentioned earlier, broadband technologies enable to convey messages in audio or in video format too. Modes of representation can vary from service to service, and this is why I will examine this question in more detail in chapter 5.

3.3 Social structures on the internet – "globality and goodness of fit"

Examining the role of social structures in the use of the internet, it testifies yet again of a democratizing potential. The internet is decentralized and in theory provides a communication channel that is available to everyone with a minimal computer literacy, regardless (again, in theory!) of their whereabouts or nationalities. Thanks to continuous innovation, the technology that is needed to establish computer networks is becoming cheaper and cheaper, therefore barriers to entry are becoming lower and lower.
Naturally, here comes a big "but:" that in the Western world access to the internet is becoming an everyday commodity is positive development, but in large parts of the world and especially in developing countries, the situation is markedly different. This poses the danger that when we talk about a "global" public sphere, we in fact mean a "Western" public sphere, forgetting economically less prosperous and thereby politically and from a military point of view "insignificant" countries. (See also chapter 4.)

The internet also provides anonymity to its users, and even more than that: free-to-choose identities, or at least roles. Using the internet is the most private and most public experience at the same time: it is public by definition (the very point of the internet is interacting with others, even if indirectly, through leaving and retrieving messages), but it is also deeply private, because the self can remain invisible to everyone else on the internet. One can take on as many and as detailed disguises – if not identities – as they

want; and there are few limitations that have to be observed when deciding what to do or where to go inside the cyberspace (bar limitations tied to either legal regulations (such as censorship), or to the business interests of other parties (i. e. some areas of the internet are of restricted access, and available only in exchange of a fee).

But this free-to-choose identity might, in my view, also act to the detriment of the public sphere. This is because this practice gets rid (or at least it could *try to get rid*) of a very important factor in every occasion of real-life social interaction: consequences. It is hard to hold someone accountable for what they said (or did) if acts of speech (or just any other act) are tied only to fictious identities. Surely, this might be positive: the internet can be used to establish an alternative to freedom of speech, should there be censorship active outside the cyberspace (this topic explored further in chapter 5.4).

But the evasion of consequences can also serve the interests of those who, willingly or unwillingly, act to the detriment of reasoned critical discussion. It is just as easy to spread misinformation on the internet as it is to take part in a constructive discourse. All sorts of personal motives could incite users to obstruct debate, make false claims or promote ideologies of questionable ethics, and one can "get away with it" easily, hiding under the imaginary identity that is only made up of a user name and an e-mail address.

However, this is but one possibility, and to suppose that willing or accidental crooks can subvert the operations of public spheres is to suppose that either the majority of internet users are malevolent or at least ignorant (which I don't believe), or that the majority of internet users are dumb (which I don't believe either). But there is another aspect of "consequences," which brings us back to Garnham's crucial point:

> the problem is to construct systems of democratic accountability integrated with media systems *of matching scale* that occupy the *same social space* as that over which economic or political decisions will be made. If the impact is universal, then both the political and media systems must be universal. (Garnham 1992: 371.)

In other words, there must be a "goodness of fit" between the public sphere(s) and the political entities that they influence – otherwise there will be no meaningful *consequences* of the activities of the public sphere. Or to put it another way: the discursive power of a public sphere can only be translated into political power in an institution that has the same (or larger) scope of authority as the scale of the discussion.

Already on the national level, this goodness of fit might be slightly damaged, as everyone can take part in on-line discussions about internal affairs of a nation, regardless of whether they are actually citizens (or residents) of the nation state in question, or foreigners who merely speak the language of discussion and have an opinion about the matter. (Naturally, this gap between those who are affected and those who can have a say in the matters might also lead to positive consequences.) But when we think of a possible global public sphere, we immediately bump into a bit of a problem: *at the moment*, there are very few (dare I say: *none*) global political institutions that could act as an executive mechanism to the common opinion crystallized in the global public sphere.

That certain aspects of civil society can "go global" is proven by the example of NGOs such as Greenpeace; but these NGOs cannot be seen as equivalent to a powerful global institution that could adapt its policies to the interests of the "global citizens."

As Habermas says: "The political public sphere can fulfil its function of [...] thematizing encompassing social problems only insofar as it develops out of the communication taking place among *those who are potentially affected"* (Habermas 2004: 365).

Tomlinson (1994, quoted in Dahlgren 1995) established a more practical point of view, taking into careful consideration that it is, in practice, not always so easy to decide who is actually "potentially affected," and who is not. He also reflected on the differences in the experience of the sociocultural interaction: talking face-to-face with a friend is a different experience from talking with him on the phone, and again it is entirely different from seeing a televised speech of an important person of another country. The internet offers various new, other ways to experience interaction with a participant (or participants) who is (are) at a physically remote location. However, countering Giddens (1991, quoted in Dahlgren 1995), who argues that "although everyone lives a local life, phenomenological worlds [worlds that we experience through their apparent phenomena] for the most part are *truly global*," Tomlinson proposes a cautious in-between stance. "Even if the immediate here and now still commands most of our attention, the geographically and temporally remote is no longer, by definition, irrelevant. The processes of mediation are altering people's cognitive maps, loyalties and frames of reference." (Dahlgren 1995: 89–90, summarizing Tomlinson's view.)

And this, if we turn back to Habermas' idea, might just mean that *practically,* or at least

phenomenologically we might indeed be potentially affected in global issues. After all, if we accept that nations are imagined communities, it is just one step further that we find the imagined global community, or several imagined global communities which include everyone *who considers themselves affected (and thus, included)*. Habermas refers to these communities, built around certain causes as "issue publics" (2006: 25).

In colloquial language, this is the phenomenon the catchphrase "think globally, act locally" refers to. It suggests that there are issues that are global in the sense that they present themselves in some form or another in every nation state. Most of these issues rather lie in the territory of the cultural public sphere or in the uncertain area of the lifeworld that is devoted to leisure, but indeed there are some at the core of the political public sphere: e.g. the idea and respect of human rights, or the question of sustainable development and global warming. To expect that the UN, the European Court of Human Rights, Amnesty International, Greenpeace or any other international organization would create a universal solution for problems akin to these is rather utopian[19]. And yet I think a global discussion, even if happening in an unstructured way, is helpful, because it raises awareness of these issues – the first step towards their solution.

In any case, it follows from the argumentation of Garnham (1992), Fraser (1992) and Tomlinson (quoted in Dahlgren 1995), that discursive communities can also be formed around any number of different causes or particular group interests. Habermas uses the term "issue publics" perhaps in a bid to emphasize that these publics are not necessarily formed in opposition to a dominating, majority discourse and group identity (conversely, Fraser (1992) emphasizes the alternative, oppositional nature of her "subaltern counterpublics"). An issue public merely means the totality of people interested in a particular problem, which may or may not be part of the "relevant discourse" taking place on the "virtual stage" of the national political public sphere. The fragmentation of the public sphere into issue publics is, according to Habermas, an unwelcome development. However, he adds that the multiplication of these publics

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[19] It is most likely that such a universal solution could not be created even if there was an authority that could carry out all the practical tasks involved, simply because different nation states – different *cultures* – might prefer different solutions to the problems.

might actually act to the benefit of the political public sphere: "[w]hile a larger number of people tend to take an interest in a larger number of issues, **the overlap of issue publics may even serve to counter trends of fragmentation.**" (Habermas 2006: 24–25.)

Lash, on the other hand, looks at the problem of globality from another point of view. In his theory of flows, in which he tries to "embed the public sphere both within an historical milieu and within wider social relations" (Crossley & Roberts 2004: 16), he proposes that the global is in fact more important than the local. It is the global flows of information, communication, images, money, ideas and technology that have a decisive impact on local politics, economics and culture (Lash 2002: 28). He speaks of "the erosion of the national 'society'," and the weakening power of nation states: "[p]olitically, supra- and sub-national institutions begin to threaten the hegemony of the institutions of the nation state" (Lash 2002: 26). On the other hand, in reference to Habermas, he also draws attention to the changing nature of institutions. He argues that institutions in general will more and more become "small, mobile and flexible groupings – sometimes enduring, often easily dissoluble – formed with an intensive affective bonding" (Lash 2002: 27). Monstrous bureaucracies are expected to die out, as quick and flexible institutions thrive.
Does it mean, then, that there is a chance for a global public sphere? According to Lash, it is more likely that *several* global public spheres will be spawned (that is, beside the ones that are already operating!), as he positions the above mentioned trends as part of the postmodernization of societies.

Bohman (2004) takes a different stance: opposing postmodernization, he argues that there is an "innovative potential of electronic public space for democracy," but this public space could only turn into a real and meaningful public sphere if it is secured through matching, *innovative* institutions. This means that, while the basic theoretical concepts of democracy should, in his view, remain unchanged, the *practice* of democracy needs to be altered to fit the global reality of today (and the foreseeable future). In other words, Bohman sees procedural (or formal) democracy to be the safeguard of also its substantial nature.

Finally, the theory of Keohane and Nye (2002: 161–178) explores the possibility of a global public sphere from yet another point of view. This theory posits that a global public sphere in the classical, Habermasian sense cannot become reality, but in a more restricted manner (but *not* through the cooperation of issue publics!) it does exist. In their essay, Keohane and Nye arrive at three conclusive points.

First, they claim that the so-called "information and communications revolution" will not have an equalizing effect on the distribution of power among states, partly because strategically important information will not become significantly more easily available on the 'net. Second, however, cheap flows of free and commercial[20] information have already multiplied the number of channels of contact between nation states, thus leaders will have more difficulty in maintaining a "coherent ordering of foreign policy issues." Third, soft power, the symbolic, discursively constructed, legitimative power becomes more important in relation to hard power, than before. (Keohane and Nye 2002: 177.)

In this theory, the abundance of information is expected to lead to the increase in the value of *credibility.* For Keohane and Nye credibility is "a key resource both for governments and NGOs," and "asymmetrical credibility is a key source of [hard] power" (2002: 172). This is because credibility is the basis upon which "foreign policy occurs," credibility is required in deals on capital markets, and last but not least soft power can only be persuasive if it is credible (Keohane and Nye 2002: 172).

To sum it up: Keohane and Nye exclude the possibility of a "classic" global public sphere, but they name *credibility* – synonymous with the term "reliability" I have used so far – as an important factor in international power relations. This falls in line with the idea that discursive power can be transformed into hard power. It also means that one way of challenging undemocratic rules would be to undermine their credibility – and the internet, with the possibility of presenting all sides to stories, by making all sorts of "unofficial" sources available, looks quite promising from this point of view.

These theories mostly concern the political public sphere, but we should not forget the

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[20] Keohane and Nye distinguish between "free," "commercial" and "strategic" information. "Free information is information that actors are willing to create and send without financial compensation from the recipient. […] Commercial information is information that actors are willing to create and send at a price. […] Strategic information […] confers great advantage on actors only if their competitors do not possess it." (Keohane and Nye 2002: 167.)

connection between public spheres and the culture industry. The argument of consequences loses its importance here, insofar as the possible practical consequences of a cultural discourse do not need to be institutional: one can debate over the artistic / cultural value of products in the public sphere, or could simply participate in the discourse there going on so as to get to know to new, interesting texts, but the uses and consumption of these texts hardly ever concerns political institutions (with the notable exception of censorship). And the existence of a global cultural public sphere is in line with the interests of the global economic sphere, too, because participants of the global cultural discourse will inevitably want to get hold of products of the culture industry.
Here, the internet proposes a different kind of ambivalence. It extends the scope of information to a global level, at the same time expanding the cultural horizon of whoever is willing to take part in this public sphere. But at the same time (see chapter 3.2), this might undermine critical activity, building an ever stronger and stronger "layman criticism," of which Habermas was already wary in 1962 (Habermas 1989: 174). This is a development that post-modern theoreticians should rejoice over.

In summary: there are ambivalent signs and trends as far as the possibility of a global public sphere is concerned – predictions are risky, because potential developments include the changing of such concepts as identity, democracy or group membership. This kept in mind, I shall ask also the following questions upon the analysis of individual services of the internet: **is there, or can there be a "goodness of fit" between the service in question and the political institutions this particular service might affect? Is the identity or role of users of the service of peculiar interest?**

3.4 The internet as sociocultural interaction

Having examined the internet from some sides now, it is not so surprising to find out that it is almost impossible to pinpoint single, apparent and straightforward trends about the internet as sociocultural interaction. The internet is consumed in many ways (for in spite of the quality of interaction, using the internet is a solitary act of *consumption*).
Therefore, to the questions that can be raised following Dahlgren's concept, along the three dimensions to measure sociocultural interaction (discursive, spatial and communal dimensions), answers can only be given through concrete examples and contexts (this is

the task of chapter 5). Having said that, there are some general theoretical issues that are worth mentioning here.

3.4.1 The discursive aspect

As for the discursive dimension (*what* people are talk about on the internet when they talk as users, not as media consumers (although these two categories on the internet seem to melt into one another)), user-generated databases, encyclopaedias and instruction videos prompt the question: can the internet provide (discursive) knowledge[21]?

That the internet is a rich warehouse of opinions and a place for discussions is unquestionable. On the first look, it seems that it also can provide valuable, in-depth knowledge about a large array of topics, and even presented in interesting, innovative and interactive ways – for example as video tutorials uploaded to a video sharing site such as YouTube[22], or as interactive seminars carried out in the virtual university of Second Life. But on a second look, so to say, the question of reliability of information (touched upon in chapter 3.2) pops up its head. Wikipedia, this user-edited global encyclopaedia, is a case in point. It is currently the 9th most popular website of the internet (Index 2007), and apparently even the National Security Agency of the USA uses it, in the terrifying practice of gaining data from it to establish whether or not a certain individual is a terrorist or not... (Fisk 2007.)

There is much talk nowadays about Web2.0[23] or the so-called community web – web services that are built around user-generated content. Taking advantage of the wisdom of the masses might provide you not only with knowledge, but also information on how to obtain knowledge – call this meta-information if you like –; i.e. a lot of community internet services focus on the idea that the best way to find interesting and important content on the internet is through the assistance of others. Hence the basic concept: share and rate whatever you find on the network, and thus help organize the information on the internet in a democratic, non-profit-driven way (examples of such services are

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21 Yes, this is mostly about Wikipedia.
22 Cf. the educative potential of the television (Dahlgren 1995: 57–59).
23 At the time of writing this thesis, the search query "Web 2.0" produces about 161 million hits on Google.

Digg, *del.icio.us* and *StumbleUpon*). Naturally, this also prompts the question of reliability, although not quite like in the case of Wikipedia or other primary sources of information (for a detailed explanation, see chapter 5.2).

In any case, it is here that I have to mention Thompson's (2002) idea on the role of misinformation, inspired by the Madisonian approach to democracy (see chapter 2.5.2). According to Thompson (who, perhaps deliberately opposing Habermas, downplays or ignores the role of privacy as the crib for *publicness*), an important consequence of the abundance of information is that the quality of all the available information will vary. But "**the fabrications and falsehoods to which the Internet gives voice may admittedly serve some useful purposes,**" because if the unreliability of information is kept in mind then it will incite critical thinking in the consumers of this information. "Even while half believing the rumours they find on the net, most citizens, I trust, will seek guidance about which ones they may fully believe" (Thompson 2002: 36–37).

It seems logical that this beneficial effect of misinformation applies to certain topics more than to others (it might not be apparent at all concerning topics which require the reader's expertise in a specific science or field of knowledge, for example).

Concerning the discursive aspect of the internet as sociocultural interaction, then, the following questions can be outlined: **what kind of information does a certain service provide, and how does it aim to guarantee the reliability of this information?**

3.4.2 The spatial aspect

As for the spatial dimension, the internet is something truly unique. First because the placelessness of cyberspace (see Lash 2002: 21, or chapter 2.5.1) is such that it permits being in several places at the same time. Not physically, but through participating in several acts of communication at the same time, creating the illusion for all the other participants that one is at the same – indeterminable, virtual – place as they are. This is what happens when someone is talking to different people at the same time on chat or messenger programs, playing in an online multiplayer game etc. Even if this "being there" experience will stay virtual, I cannot help subscribing to the ontological hermeneutical approach here: it is creation that takes place in the mere interpretation of the flows of information.

What does this mean from the point of view of my thesis – or Habermas' ideas?
Importantly, however keen I am on the idea of placelessness, I have to admit it mostly concerns interpersonal, not mass communication, chiefly because it demands the mutual exchange of texts (giving immediate feedback to the communication partners), which cannot be done in mass communication. But in any case the placelessness nature of the internet means *openness* of communication in a very practical way: it simplifies staying in touch with others and thus helps the spread of information.

Concerning the spatial characteristics of the internet, it is noteworthy also that the biggest, almost infinite resource of cyberspace is, in fact, space.
What I mean is that it is amazingly easy to set up new places of discussion on the internet – one could count the clicks of mouse it takes to register at a free forum provider company. The only question is: does this possibility not undermine the credibility and value of such spaces (see also 3.4.3)? And if there is always an alternative public space of discussion to everything (and not just for meaningful "subaltern counterpublics," but even for public spheres that only represent empty or insignificant differences in opinion), how can someone know which ones are meaningful, which ones are not, and how can someone participate in all the relevant discussions at the same time?

There is also another question concerning the modes of consumption of the internet. Is the verbality of the internet the same as that of real life speech acts? What are the non-verbal communicational devices that are used? Simply: in what (physical) ways do people communicate over the internet, how do these modes of consumption fit into the theoretical framework of late modernity (cf. Lash and Dahlgren), and what are the implications of such modes of communication as to the theory of communicative action? Can a public sphere exist *solely* in cyberspace? (Dahlgren (1995: 20) argues it cannot; there must be fact-to-face interaction to it, too.)
In summary, the question raised by the examination of the spatial aspects of the internet as sociocultural interaction could be as follows. **How and where is a particular text consumed – and what are the implications of the particular mode of consumption?**

3.4.3 The communal aspect

Finally, the communal dimension of the internet as sociocultural interaction brings us once again to the question of identities, which I presented in the previous chapters. But not only to the question of identities, as it is aptly described by William Galston.

He examined online communities according to the criterion set up by Bender (1982): according to these, a community, held together by shared understandings and a sense of belonging, is a group of people where membership is limited, norms are shared, ties between members are (at least partly) personal and affective, and where there is a sense of mutual obligation among the members (Galston 2002: 44–50).

In Galston's understanding, most internet communities fail to be communities in this "real" sense of the word. Membership in online communities is more often than not voluntary, and therefore – given that "for most people, diversity is a nice place to visit, but they do not really want to live there" – these communities are more likely to be heterogeneous than homogeneous (Galston 2002: 55–56). Being a member in an online discussion group is often "preaching to the converted;" what's more, groups tend to radicalise easily[24], further lowering the chances of productive inter-group discussions. "[online groups] may intensify current tendencies toward fragmentation and polarization in […] civic life" (Galston 2002: 54).

However, the author acknowledges that "online groups can fulfil important emotional and utilitarian needs," even if they cannot be taken as solutions for "our current civic ills, let alone as comprehensive models of a better future" (Galston 2002: 56).

But even if most of the online groups are not communities but merely groups organized around the idea of sharing information among like-minded people, it might still be interesting to put Galston's scepticism to the test through examining concrete examples of – well, *so-called* communities, for a lack of better word.

This is reasoned partly by the fact that Galston could not have written about the phenomenon known as "Web 2.0" or, perhaps slightly misleadingly, the "community web" (O'Reilly 2005). This loose umbrella term refers to all those services of the

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[24] "[…]a group of like-minded people who engage in discussion among themselves are likely to adopt the more extreme rather than more moderate variants of the group's shared beliefs, and particularly high levels of polarization occur when group members meet anonymously, which is precisely what the Internet [sic] permits" (Galston 2002: 55).

internet that somehow revolve around the concept of community or user-generated content (from *MySpace* through *Wikipedia* to *Digg*). These sites try to function in ways ordinary groups – discussion forums, newsgroups, mailing lists – cannot.

A prime example of such "web 2.0"-sites is that of social networking sites (such as *MySpace*, *Facebook* or *Friendster*). These services aim at reconstructing their users' real-life social networks on the internet: whoever registers can browse among the profiles of other members and indicate if there is a real-life contact between them. The end result is a huge database of personal profiles and a map of personal relationships (something Stanley Milgram would rejoice over). The social networking sites usually offer an armada of services that try to "improve the user experience" beyond simply providing a way to prove others that someone has non-imaginary friends; these services range from built-in instant messaging programs, through message boards and storage space for photos or videos, to virtual gifts or gestures one can pass on to friends.

By their basic concept, social networking sites can be seen as an attempt to eliminate the factor of distance from real-life social networks; it does not matter whether my friends live next door or two continents away, I can just as easily maintain (some kind of a) contact with them through *Facebook*. The interesting point in such sites is that they only make sense if everybody actually uses them under their own names; and in this respect, they differ from all other potential "communities" on the internet.

Community knowledge repositories, such as Wikipedia, should also be distinguished from ordinary discussion groups on the internet. Again, the basic concept is simple: people – either "members only" or any visitor of the site – can edit entries in a searchable database, and on a neighbouring (linked) webpage they can carry out a discussion concerning the topic of the entry in question. In other words, even though the area of interest is specified, this does not necessarily guarantee that like-minded people will be members of the "editorial community" (see also chapter 7). In case there is a supposedly impartial editorial committee overseeing the operations going on in the database, this is one area that looks suitable for reasoned debate, unlike much of the other types of online discussion groups.

Last, but not least, there exist also groups on the internet – missing from Galston's analysis – that I previously termed groups of meta-information (such as *Digg*,

del.icio.us or *StumbleUpon*). The aim of these groups is to organize information by taking advantage of "the public opinion" of users. These groups can become places of rational, reasoned debate, but it is perhaps more important that they might act as a sample of real-life public opinion and public opinion formation. (See chapter 5.2.)
Considering the points above, the questions to be asked in the analysis of online groups, or group-focused online services: **can the group in question be regarded as a community? And if so, can such a community exist solely virtually? Finally, could the group in question have a meaningful impact on "offline" communities?**

3.5 Summary of questions

The basic question of this thesis is whether certain services of the internet can help redemocratizing the public sphere, or in other words, can they help discursively creating "soft power" that can legitimate a democratic rule? Do they help reasoned debate through which the common interest of the people can be distilled, or do they help particular, minority interests to thrive? Could this debate happen on a global scale? Considering postmodernist theories, does a particular service of the internet contribute to the destabilization of traditional social relationships, or to a general feeling of uncertainty – and if so, how?

Keeping in mind this basic set of questions, applying Dahlgren's topology to the internet leads us to the following questions of smaller, analytical scope:
Is a certain online service part of the media institution? If so, who has vested interests in modifying its output? Is this output censored according to business-related or political interests? Is a particular service capable of setting an agenda *independent of* conventional media? What kind of business model does a certain service utilize?
Is there a goodness of fit between the scope of authority of certain web service, and the issues that its users try to have solved by it? Is the identity or role of these users of peculiar interest? Does a certain web service help formal or substantial democracy?
Inseparably from all the above, what kind of information does a certain web service provide, and how can the reliability of this information be maintained? How and where is it consumed, and what are the implications of this particular mode of consumption?
Could the group of users of a certain web service be regarded as a community (and if

so, could it exist solely virtually)? Does it allow discussion among fellow users? Can it influence or change "real-life" communities?

These questions focus directly on the public sphere, but I shall not forget about the indirect role of the culture industry on the public sphere, either (chapters 1.2 and 2.7).
In my understanding, Adorno's and Horkheimer's theory works on a different level than the counterarguments offered by e.g. Miège, Hesmondhalgh and Longhurst. The original theory of the culture industry is tied to the concept of autonomous art and its (declining) emancipatory role in modern society, while defendants of the "complex, ambivalent and contested" culture industri*es* approach the question from the side of practicalities, not addressing the philosophical issue of autonomous art.
In the confines of this MA thesis, I cannot undertake this task, either. While subscribing to the idea of multiple, complex and ambivalent culture industries (for it is, I believe, reconcilable with the original idea of the single, over-encompassing culture industry, given that Adorno used the term slightly differently to the way it is understood by his critiques), I cannot evaluate the validity of Adorno's philosophical arguments.
However, I can analyse two aspects of the culture industry (or industries), and the effects of the internet on them – two aspects that Habermas himself also touched upon. Namely, I shall examine the effects of particular web services on the availability of cultural goods (and the information about these cultural goods), and the effects of particular web services on what Habermas termed "layman criticism," i.e. the pluralization and relativization of value systems that these cultural products are measured by. It is expected that the internet has a ambivalent role in these regards, because it is thought to increase both the availability of such products *and* layman criticism. These tendencies, although working in opposing directions, are not expected to balance one another, because they work in qualitatively different ways. But in any case, I shall examine which features of a certain web service point to which direction.
I shall analyse the questions through individual web services (i.e. individual homepages and other technologies). But before this analysis, I turn my attention to the physical build-up and infrastructure of the internet, as well as its spread and popularity – because this will provide a context in which the analysis itself can take place.

4 Economic background

In analysing the possible democratizing qualities of the internet, I now turn my attention to its physical – infrastructural – constitution, and the corollaries stemming from it. I believe that the material conditions of the internet contribute to understanding the actual, practical effects this global network (potentially) has.

Strictly from the point of view of the technology, the internet is a global, decentralized computer network – a network of networks that follow the same communicational standards (known in the case of internet as "protocols," such as TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol / Internet Protocol). Relying on these standards, the internet provides various services to its users, such as e-mail, on-line chat and instant messaging, peer-to-peer data transfer or the world wide web. The web service provides users with the possibility to view (and, increasingly importantly, to create and modify) multimedia documents (web pages) through their web browser applications (such as Mozilla Firefox or Internet Explorer). Web pages are stored on web servers, which also store information about the pages' hyperlinks (dynamic points of connection). (TechEncyclopedia 2007.)

Importantly, although the internet is decentralized – there is no one single point of origin, one central computer that makes everything running –, there are some points of orientation. Every computer that is on-line is identified by a unique series of numbers, known as IP-address (originally made up of four numbers, each between 0 and 255, separated by a dot (e.g. 123.123.123.123); a sign of the spread of the internet is that a new type of IP address, consisting of 6 numbers, is being introduced). An international non-profit organization, the ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) manages the database that associates IP addresses with familiar internet-addresses such as www.uwasa.fi (which stands for 193.166.120.46). (ICANN 2007.)

Users connect to the internet using the access provided by Internet Service Provider (ISP) companies. Importantly, neither ICANN nor any of the ISPs own the internet in any way; they merely supply the infrastructure to connect to the internet via their servers. (Unique internet addresses (domain names), on the other hand, can be bought in the sense that one can register such an address at ICANN (through intermediaries, for a fee), and so buy the right to exclusively use that particular address.) The ISPs' activities

are regulated by law in a similar manner to, say, telephone companies. (TechEncyclopedia 2007.)

Without going into technological details about the connection to the internet, it is important to distinguish, according to the speed of the connection to the internet, between "broadband" and "narrowband" connections: broadband connections allow the operation of services that involve large amounts of data to be transferred, such as on-line audio and video streaming. (TechEncyclopedia 2007.)

As mentioned earlier, the internet is the result of an originally military project (the ARPAnet) having turned into civil and commercial use (Living Internet 2000).

4.1 Barriers to entry

Without going extensively into details, a quick overview of the infrastructural barriers to accessing the internet is necessary.

It is possible for all kinds of gadgets and technological devices to connect to the internet for some reason or another, but human users of he internet definitely need a computer (hardware), pieces of software that control the operation of the computer and establish a link between the hardware and its user and, finally, some kind of connection to the network (be it wire-based or wireless). Through these physical factors, the infrastructural differences between countries (and within countries) affect the availability of the internet, which in the end means that **in the present circumstances, we cannot talk of a globally equal and democratic internet,** if only by its unequal availability that is tied to various socio-economic reasons. This is true even though computer hardware is getting cheaper and cheaper, and more and more easily available (Keohane and Nye 2002: 164–165, see also The Economist 2007c).

As for the software-related barriers to entry to the internet, I would like to focus on only one important aspect of the topic – the question of piracy (although it would be interesting to analyse how this question, through the question of intellectual rights and industry standards is related to business interests, lobbies and national as well as international politics). The practice of illegal copying and distributing of software is rampant in large parts of the world: according to the Business Software Alliance, an organization representing the interests of large software manufacturers, "35% of all

software installed in 2006 on personal computers worldwide was obtained illegally." Piracy is most apparent in Central and Eastern Europe (68% of software installed in 2006 obtained illegally), Latin America (66%), and the Middle-East /Africa region (60%). (BSA 2007.)

My point of citing these figures here is to draw attention to the fact, while software piracy is ethically questionable, it might contribute to the spread of the internet and thereby its democratization (at least if we suppose that those people obtain the illegal copies, who otherwise couldn't afford a certain piece of software).

4.2 Worldwide internet penetration

Taking into consideration the barriers to entry cited above might offer an explanation for the following statistics. According to a report compiled using statistics collected by analyst Nielsen//Netratings, the International Telecommunications Union and other sources, the global internet penetration, i.e. the percentage of adults who use the internet regularly for any purpose, is 18.9% (Miniwatts 2007). Penetration rates (according to data compiled on 30th September 2007) of the individual statistical regions are as follows: **Africa – 4,7%, Asia – 12.4%, Europe – 41,7%, Middle East – 17.3%, North America – 70.2%, Latin America / Caribbean – 20.8%, Oceania / Australia: 55.2%** (Miniwatts 2007). See also *Table 1* in the appendix.

That the internet is still in its infancy for the biggest part of the world is also suggested by the growth rates. It is, unsurprisingly, the North American region that produced the slowest growth between the years 2000 and 2007: in this period the usage of internet doubled (117% growth rate). In the same period, Asia produced a 302% growth in internet penetration – and in that it still lags well behind Africa (875%) and the Middle East (902%), but naturally in these regions the relatively low base is behind these stellar numbers. (Miniwatts 2007.)

From the point of view of the public sphere, it is interesting to match penetration rates with actual population figures. So doing it is revealed that Asia could be considered the "heaviest" internet user: this region, with an online population of about 459 million, accounts for 36,9% of all internet usage. In this comparison, Europe is runner-up with 27.2% (338 million users), while North America is third with 18.9% (235 million users). (Miniwatts 2007, see also *Table 1.*)

Given the significant differences between the numbers, using the overall 18.9% figure to describe the state and spread of the internet around the world would probably not give an appropriate picture – especially since the possible existence of a global Habermasian public sphere is questioned even from the point of view of theories (see chapter 3.3). Nevertheless, **penetration data from various countries shows that in most part of the world it is still only a minority that can take advantage of the internet.** On the other hand, every sign points to the direction of the further spread of the net, and there are no factors inherent in its infrastructure that would cause late-comers to suffer for being late. In addition to this, in certain countries, such as Finland, Estonia or the United States, the internet has gathered such a critical mass that it can now play an important practical role in public administration – and, one might expect, in well-wired countries, the internet is already making important contribution to the goings-on of local public spheres.

4.3 Freedom and advertising

From more than just the point of view of the business models applied on the internet, it is important to stress how the internet can be "free." *Connecting to* the internet, as described above, is in principle not free. But a lot of services on the net are indeed free, from the point of view of clients at least: they are financed by advertisers, who display their ads placed next to the relevant, "primary" content of the homepages. This advertising-funded business model is well-known from the traditional commercial media (see the "logic of broadcasting" by Miège (1989: 10)).

However, the model of online advertising differs from that of traditional broadcast media in a number of important respects. First, technologies enable advertisers and advertising space providers to collect data from individual users, creating their "user profiles," through the analysis of which advertising can be better targeted. The problem is that once online available data (browsing habits, sites visited, e-mail contacts etc.) is collected, it can potentially be abused as well. The most well-known (Alexa 2007c) search engine, Google, is a case in point. Google collects data from its users in order to refine its search engine and to offer advertisers precision in the targeting of their ads (Google 2007). They maintain that it is impossible even for the company's own employees to match particular pieces of information with individual users (Economist

2007b, Google 2007a). But however good the company's slogan ("We're not evil") sounds, it does not eliminate the danger of potential abuse of an ever growing array of publicly available private information.

Second, if technology enables advertisers to launch interactive, "eye-candy" adverts, or embed video ad spots into websites, it also enables users to block these ads (as well as small textual advertisements) – see for example the ad-blocker feature of popular browser Mozilla Firefox (Mozilla 2007). The irony is that after all it is in the users' interests not to be able to block the ads, because it is through the advertising-funded nature of the web that several of its services and contents can remain free.
At the time of writing this paper, online advertising is said to be in an excellent shape, illustrated among others by the example of the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times*. Both papers, by the end of summer, 2007, made available the full contents of their websites, instead of charging a fee for the access of the site archives. The reason? Both papers' publishers found that it is more profitable to provide users with free content, garnished with advertisings, than to charge visitors for the access of this content. According to online trade group the Internet Advertising Bureau, the net is the fastest-growing ad marketplace: from the $18.2 billion British ad market, it represents a 14.7% slice, and without its contribution, the total British advertising spending across all media would have fallen by 1.9% during the first half of 2007. (Shannon 2007.)

Third, there is an important difference with regards to the available advertising space on the internet and in broadcast media. On the net, (advertising) space abounds, whereas it is a scarce resource in broadcast media. There is only one prime-time zone in the evening, only one Superbowl every year, and the length of commercial breaks cannot be freely stretched. In contrast, there are hundreds of billions of websites, and the creation of new ones does not necessarily mean that old ones get obsolete (see the example of the *archives* of the Financial Times or other print papers).
(The abundance of space also means that online publications hardly ever have to consider "economies of space:" publications can cater for the demands of tiny niche-groups, because making or keeping yet another set of homepages available for readers does not lead to additional costs, but it provides additional advertising surfaces. This is

how online publications can take advantage of the "long tail" business model: small sales (in this case, small value advertising sales) might add up to significant revenues outweighing the minor costs involved in their online publication (cf. Anderson 2006).)

The advertising space offered on the internet is, thus, much larger, and much more fragmented, than that of traditional media. In practice, this fragmentation also means that smaller advertisers can compete with large, multinational companies – something they would be unable to do in the territory of traditional broadcast media. For example, one can buy contextual "classified ads" to appear on Google's search results pages, and pay 50 cents after each click on the ad in question – the price is the same for all buyers, and even if classified ads are not especially spectacular visually, they might be just as relevant. Besides, everyone who has a website can become an ad space provider him- or herself, through various ad networks such as Google's AdSense. (Economist 2007a).
In short: a lot of advertising space means relatively cheaper advertising, and fragmentation means a natural resistance to oligo- or monopolistic representation of business interests *in the advertising sphere*. (However, ad space providers and companies that compile databases of users' browsing habits might reach and abuse oligo- or monopolistic positions.)

To sum up, two currently apparent trends on the internet are its increased capitalization through advertising, and the personalization of the advertisements. This holds the possibility that private data can be abused according to business interests..
In any case, if the internet could positively contribute to the operation of the public sphere, this contribution is to an increasing extent contingent upon citizens' consumption, or rather the advertisers' belief in the possible maintenance of high levels of consumption. Capitalism and the possibility of a democratic public sphere are, in this regard, tied closely together.
While this can be seen as the "invasion of the system into the lifeworld," I think the capitalism of online ads is closer to the ideal of the "young and healthy" capitalism described by Habermas in the *Structural Transformation...* than to the feudalism-turned monopolcapitalism described by Mills, Graham and Luke, for reasons stated above.

5 Analysis

In this chapter I analyse certain services of the internet, following the conceptual framework outlined in chapter 3. Namely, I have decided to examine blogs, social news and bookmarking sites, the technology of RSS, and finally, discussion forums.

The selection and focus on these particular services is somewhat arbitrary, but not without reason. From the armada of communication services and technologies brought about by the internet I chose these ones because they represent aptly the ways the internet itself is expected to redemocratize public communication. Blogs, social news and bookmarking sites and forums facilitate the online information exchange of their users, and they do it in such a communicative form that stands **between traditional interpersonal and mass communication**: messages are read and reflected upon by several people (sometimes, literally: *masses*), but the ability of immediate and qualitatively equal feedback is given to each member of this audience.

In this thesis I can only attempt an analysis of limited depth of these services – however, I believe this analysis can highlight certain important points as well as directions for further research. In chapter 7, I mention certain other services and technologies that are recommended for similar analysis.

5.1 Blogs

5.1.1 The concept

The word "blog" originates from "weblog," which originally referred to an automatically generated, chronological list of events that took place on a web server (TechEncyclopedia 2007). This chronological organization is the main feature of blogs, which are websites that usually consist of only a single page, with entries lined up one under the other, usually with the most recent on the top.

However, there are no "official" rules or definitions of a blog, so the term should be looked at loosely. Apart from the chronological organization, blogs can (and do) differ greatly; and while I suspect that the term itself is often used derogatively, referring to personal blogs of lesser importance, I also think that part of the reason for this is because professional, themed blogs, run by skilled editors or even an editorial team,

simply do not look like blogs at all.

In any case, often there is a possibility to comment the entries on blogs, and thereby to carry out a discussion of the topics. Comments might be moderated (a.k.a. censored), or altogether forbidden, by the owner(s) of the blogs. It is also customary to equip blogs with sets of links to other, related blogs or websites (cf. Tremayne et al. 2006), and to embed videos, pictures or sound files into the texts published on the blog. Entries are often organized (described) by freely chosen keywords, known as tags.

5.1.2 The content

Blogs can be about anything and everything. They are, as I noted above, often identified with personal "self-blogs," reporting about the life of their owner in a more or less interesting way. (See Arnold 2007.) Naturally, these blogs might not be meant for public reading at all, but in any case they propose an opportunity for the Habermasian "audience-oriented subjectivity" to thrive – because even if there are no official style guides to follow, and one can easily write under a pseudonym (or "nick"), writing a blog is a conscious intellectual activity.

Apart from these self-blogs, which do account for the majority (52%) of blogs at least in the US (Pew 2006), there are theme-oriented blogs, focusing on any number of topics from technology or computers through cars and movies to medicine and horticulture. Of increased popularity are the "life-hacking" blogs (lifestyle blogs, offering practical advice; such as *Lifehacker.com*), and there are also blogs that pose to be modern art (such as *PostSecret*, a blog where anonymously sent in and creatively packaged secrets are put on public display; http://postsecret.blogspot.com). According to Pew's survey, around 11% of blogs publishes articles of political opinion (Pew 2006). The style of blogs can vary greatly, and the blogs can be written by one or more people.

Some analysts argue (Arnold 2007) that blogs are inapt for the task of publishing relevant scientific articles or texts of logical argumentation – however, based on my personal experience I oppose this view. The blog named *Critical Biomass* is only one example of informative, informal, yet scientifically accurate and appropriately referenced blogs (http://criticalbiomass.freeblog.hu; although it is in Hungarian, the layout, illustrations and references (mostly to foreign academic journals) should give anybody an idea).

The point of blogs is to provide easily accessible information in a most often informal, rather than formal, manner. Its uses include complementing official – business or politics-related – sources of information, as seen in the case, for example, of the personal blog of Hungarian prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány (http://blog.amoba.hu).
Last, but not least, blogs can also provide an alternative to conventional media, tackling censorship and presenting the opinion of minorities. It could function as the terrain of underground, opposition journalism – for a more recent example, consider the example of *Burma Digest,* a blog tracking the events of the revolt against the junta in Myanmar (http://www.burmadigest.info, and see also CNN 2007).

5.1.3 The business model

Starting a blog is both technically easy and, with the help of blog service providers (companies that provide space for blogs and tools to manage them, such as WordPress or BlogSpot), it can also be completely free. The free templates provided by the blog service provider can also be modified, and of course it is possible to create a blog from scratch, without using pre-defined templates, if one is familiar with programming in html (hypertext markup language, the language that "tells" the web browsers how to display the contents included in a website).
If production is cheap, revenues also tend to be low – the overwhelming majority of blogs do not make money for their creators in any way (Tozzi 2007, see also Sifry 2007). It is customary for blogs to ask for donations from visitors, but the primary source of revenue for independent blogs – blogs that do not function an as advertising space and that are not part of a larger media organization – is advertising revenue. However, few bloggers can afford to focus on writing the blog as a full-time job. (Tozzi 2007.)
There are also blogs that are not independent in the sense that they are part of a larger scheme: e.g. they might be sites of advertising themselves (for the products or services of their writer), or acting as an additional communication channel between the company and its partners. Online versions of traditional media products also often employ blogs as a new surface to present material (see chapter 5.1.4).
From the point of view of the visitors is that the overwhelming majority of blogs are **freely available**. They are not to be confused by subscription-only newsletters or

"premium content" on websites. (Nevertheless, they might act as an advertising front for such content.)

5.1.4 Are blogs part of the media institution?

There is no straight yes/no answer to this question. "Blogs" as such might not be part of the media, but certain blogs are. On the one hand, by now it has become a trend to arm traditional media outlets with themed blogs, in what can be seen as a double objective of increasing traffic to the publisher's website and thereby creating advertising revenue, while at the same time offering a more direct communication channel to consumers of the publication. The website of English broadsheet newspaper *Guardian* features 18 blogs (Guardian 2007), the *Daily Telegraph* runs 45 of them (Telegraph 2007), and *Independent* launched in October 2007 its 12 own blogs (Independent 2007). Major US daily *The New York Times* has 40 themed blogs (New York Times 2007), the *Wall Street Journal* 16 (Wall Street Journal 2007), and *Helsingin Sanomat* is also following the trend with 26 blogs (Helsingin Sanomat 2007). Not everyone is so keen on the new method of getting in touch with readers: French daily *Le Monde* does not, at the time of writing, have its own blog, but notably its website features an extensive selection from the best of the French blog-crop (Le Monde 2007). Best-selling Hungarian daily *Népszabadság* follows similar tactics, with an editorial blog picking and mixing (and in case of foreign blogs: translating) articles posted in various blogs all over the internet (Népszabadság 2007). Naturally it is not unusual for television and radio channels to operate their own blogs or to offer a selection from other blogs on their website (or both).

But the sheer number of blogs is at best an indication of trends; it would require an in-depth analysis to reveal how important role they play in the life of the offline publications (for example, it could be analysed to what extent blogs cross-reference each other, other blogs and other offline publications). In fact, this short rundown on important newspapers using blogs reveals something that follows straight from the very concept of blogs.

The word "blog" refers to a certain way of publishing information, a certain organization of a website. It has connotations attached to it – e.g. a blog is often

expected to be written in a personal, or at least informal style, openly representing some kind of bias towards its subject –, it also has a certain "charm" or "hype" attached to it – it might be *très chic* to read, let alone write, blogs –, but in the end "blog" in any instance could be replaced with the considerably more boring term of "website." Blog is all about the form, but it is the *content* that matters. It is, I believe, a widespread fallacy to refer to blogs as if they represented a totally new concept in online information publishing: in a restrictive use of the word, "blogs" became to mean those particular websites that exemplify, in the *format* of a blog, citizen "journalism." But the “blogs – traditional media” dichotomy is misleading. Certain blogs are part of what is commonly referred to as traditional media (even if the larger part of blogs is not).

In the theory of the public sphere, Habermas (2006) attributes to the mass media the role of filtering the "published opinions" and issues (originating from either the political system, or the civil society), picking a handful as "relevant" and channelling, framing the formation of public opinion around these. This demands that the media both (a) produces news items by first hand reporting and (b) carries out a "secondary procession" of said news, or the formulation of some kind of an opinion about them.

(a) I am convinced that original news reporting, if it is to be effective and accountable, requires an institutional, organizational background. It is indeed the job of media professionals to produce a large share of news because they, or the organizations behind them, have the financial, professional and legal means to do so. Might it be that blogs and bloggers take up such a role? In theory, by all means, yes. As for existing media outlets, it can be seen from the short overview above how they are trying to incorporate blogs (as an alternative *form* of information dissemination) into their profile.
Independent blogs, i.e. blogs that started out as not being part of a media enterprise, have a natural disadvantage – their resources are limited. If, that is to say, they have any significant resources at all; seeing that a lot of blogs are part-time projects of a one-man team (Pew 2006: ii), it is no wonder that they cannot employ a substantially stable business model. In fact, only two of the commercially most profitable blogs deal in first hand news reporting (Tozzi 2007).
In addition, a further piece of analysis that suggests that independent blogs do not

threaten the news-production of established media is a report by blog search engine Technorati (Sifry 2007), comparing the number of references received by top blogs and the websites of offline publications. On the top of the list is the online edition of the *New York Times* (referenced in blogs 83,740 times in the last quarter of 2006), followed by *CNN* (70,100 references) and *Yahoo! News* (68,233 references). Online versions of traditional media publications dominate the first half of the list: the most referenced – most influential – "new-media establishment" is *Engadget*, at the 19th place, with 20,295 references.

Engadget is the 501st most popular website in the world at the time of writing (Alexa 2007), attracting roughly 0,3% of the web's daily traffic. It is undoubtedly a blog: a single webpage with short, opinionated and cross-linked articles lined up under one another. And it is also, undoubtedly, part of what is generally referred to as “traditional media:” its publisher Weblogs, Inc. is owned by American Online – a wholly owned subsidiary of Time Warner Inc. (Time Warner 2005). Time Warner's portfolio also includes news channel CNN, the *Time* magazine (and about 130 other print publications), cable channel *HBO* and movie production company *Warner Brothers Inc.* (Time Warner 2007).

The most influential political blog, according to Technorati's analysis (Sifry 2007) is *The Huffington Post* (http://www.huffingtonpost.com). It is not tied directly to other (offline) media organizations, but it is a business undertaking in its own right, with a staff of 26 people at the editorial office (The Huffington Post 2007) and a venture capital investor as owner (SoftBank Capital 2007).

(Technorati's method promises to provide more accurate results in measuring a blog’s influence than simply counting visitors – supposing that *other* bloggers do credit their sources, which is an uncertain assumption. But I tend to trust it, because the web offers great transparency: with the help of tags and search engines, it is very easy to discover plagiarism or flawed references, and via commenting or publishing a post on a rival blog, it is also very easy to spread this kind of meta-information (about the quality, reliability or source of *other* pieces of info). In addition, given the business model of "independent" blogs, notably the point that visitors are not charged for the content they can find on the website, there is not a huge incentive to plagiarize, or at least it is indirect, in the sense that the plagiarist does not directly benefit from the act, but

indirectly, through supposedly increased advertising revenues generated by an increased flow of visitors.)

However, if independent blogs – for their lack of resources – cannot compete with established media organizations (*whether or not their online products take the shape of blogs!*), there is at least one niche area where they can effectively contribute to news production: this is the area of local news, under the radar of larger media institutions, who have to take into consideration economies of scale in their operation. E.g. the blog *Gothamist* (one of the most profitable blogs (Tozzi 2007)), reports local sports, traffic and crime related news, accompanied also by a digital map, so local visitors to the site from can immediately see there what happened in their neighbourhood (Gothamist 2007).

(b) It is suspected that independent blogs have a greater influence in news dissemination than in news reporting, because they provide a cheap and easy way for everyone to publicly reflect on current news and events. This is the main role of the *blogosphere* – but just how important that role is?

According to Technorati's latest available report, there were about 70 million blogs in April 2007 (Sifry 2007). However, an important figure is missing from Technorati's analysis, notably the number of *active*, regularly updated, not abandoned blogs. This figure is estimated to be around 15.5 million, which suggests that while the overall number of blogs has been constantly growing since their appearance in the end of the 90s, the number of active blogs seems to have reached its peak (Green 2007).

This is to be kept in mind when considering some mind-boggling figures: about 120,000 new blogs are born each day, or 1.4 blogs every second (Sifry 2007). On the other hand, an estimated 60-80% of the blogs are abandoned within a month, or, as a somewhat bitter analyst noted, the average blog has the life span of a fruit fly (quoted in Arnold 2007). Every day, between 3,000 and 7,000 fake blogs or spam blogs (splogs) are created (the purpose of these is to act as advertising front). The blogosphere is growing by 1.5 million new posts every day – that is 17 new entries every second. (Sifry 2007.)

These figures suggest a large, and in places (abandoned blogs, splogs) fragmented, unconnected blogosphere. On the other hand, it has been shown, that both the in- and

the outbound links on blogs are distributed according to the "power law" or 80/20 law (Tremayne et al. 2006, Kottke 2003). This means that roughly 20% of the blogs provides 80% of the links to other websites, and that 20% of blogs are pointed at by 80% of the links from other sites. Simply, one-fifth of the blogs are highly influential (note that referencing a blog does not necessarily mean endorsing its views!), while most others have considerably lower visibility (see also Sifry 2007). The blogosphere has an **influential, small inner core** and an **extensively fragmented periphery.**

Just how influential that core is is shown by the following example: in May 2007, *Engadget* posted a breaking news item about the delay of two products of IT manufacturer Apple Inc. Within minutes of the publication of the item, which later turned out to be false, massive selling of Apple's shares began, knocking the share price from $107.89 to $103.42 – a $4 billion decrease in the overall value of the company. Quite an impact, though after an official press release clarified the news to be hoax, the share price quickly recovered (Engadget 2007, TechCrunch 2007, Valleywag 2007).

It is also interesting to look at the readership of blogs. Statistics in this regard are uncertain, but they might be able to offer some indicative points of orientation at least.

According to a last year report by research programme Pew Internet & American Life Project, of those American adults who use the internet regularly, 39% (roughly 57 million persons) reads and 8% (about 12 million people) writes blogs (Pew 2006). Similarly, a survey by Metro and Telegraph Media claims that 40% of those adults polled responded that they have read a blog the previous week; the corresponding figure in the UK was 13%, in France 25% and in Denmark 12% (quoted in Arnold 2007). In the light of Technorati's findings about the current state of the blogosphere, with special reference to the fact that the growth of the number of active blogs seems to have stalled (Sifry 2007 and Green 2007), it might be hypothesized that the number of blog-readers could have slightly increased since the time these two surveys were taken.

These are not insignificant numbers. It is commonly argued (cf. Tremayne et al. 2006) that the internet in general and blogs in particular had an undeniable effect on the campaigns and the outcome of the 2004 US presidential elections. Even if independent blogs just follow "parasitically" the media’s agenda, or merely act as disseminators of information (instead of producing news themselves), they – or at least their influential inner core – have proven important in public opinion formation.

Upon their rise to popularity, some welcomed blogs as harbingers of a new era of media, where traditional journalism becomes obsolete (Arnold 2007). This claim, as I hope to have proven, errs in its underlying assumption that the "blogs – traditional media" dichotomy can be justified. If we understand "blogs" as referring to "independent websites of civil journalism," the claim still doesn't hold up, because independent blogs lack the resources of constant and quality news reporting (at least on the national, let alone international, level). On the other hand, as the example of *Engadget* or the *Gawker*-group[25] shows, blogs can become part of the media institution themselves. Blogs might make the entry to the media market easier (because of the low costs involved in starting an online newspaper, as opposed to a paper-based one), and the blogosphere is indeed important as a secondary commentator and disseminator of news and information, but if they are to become influential also in the *reporting* (producing) of news, and not "parasitic" on the traditional media institution – then they have to become part of this media institution themselves – in which case the *blog – non-blog* distinction loses its content.

As a closing comment, I must note that deciding whether or not a particular blog belongs to the established, organizational media might be problematic. Perhaps the existence of a filtering mechanism involved in the posting of an entry can be regarded as a sign of a "professional" blog. By this filtering mechanism I mean that in the staff responsible for the publication of the blog there are people who treat the potential articles in a way they are supposed to be treated by an editorial office before their publication: drafts are edited and copy-edited, proofread and fact-checked. This kind of filtering mechanism is absent from most forms of online communication (posting or commenting on blogs or discussion forums.)

5.1.5 Globality and goodness of fit

Once again we are faced with the limitations of the generalization of speaking about "the blogs as such." As the example of Gothamist shows, even within one blog, perfect "goodness of fit" (chapter 3.3) and "irrelevant globality" can meet: this blog publishes local news from New York, but naturally it is available from all over the world, and with

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[25] A publishing company with the core activity of publishing multiple, themed blogs (Gawker 2007).

the availability comes the opportunity to post items or comment on the blog, too – so the "goodness of fit" only applies for those readers who do reside in New York (Gothamist 2007). As is often the case on the internet, the language of the blog might act as a barrier to entry and consequently improve the goodness of fit – while this, at the same time, might also lower the chances of globality.

(The blogosphere's dominating language in the last quarter of 2006 proved to be, somewhat surprisingly, Japanese: 37% of the entries on blogs use this language, followed closely by English (36%). Another interesting trend was the increasing number of blogs from the Middle East: Farsi is a newcomer in the top 10 of blog languages, with 1% of all new posts. (Sifry 2007, see also *Table 2*).)

On the other hand, even international blogs can reach a certain "goodness of fit" in the sense that the topic of the blog something the practice of which does not in any way involve institutions – a culinary blog being a good example. Blogs can help the creation of global issue publics.

Given the sheer size of the blogosphere, it is hard to empirically analyse how global blogs, in general, are, i.e. how many of them address global issues and how many of them manage to reach (and get involved) a global audience. It is certain that the share of languages suggests an unequal flow of information. As seen in *Table 2*, Japanese is the most popular language of blogs, but English still seems more important: only 5 blogs in the 50 most referenced (most influential) ones are written outside the United States or Great Britain (Technorati 2007). However, this fact neither proves nor suggests that most of the topics these blogs address deal with regionally specific political issues[26].

What is sure is that there are blogs that do address global issues, and at the same time urge readers to follow the "think globally, act locally" principle (see chapter 3.3). One example of this is shown by Treehugger, a blog promoting environmental consciousness (Treehugger 2007). It is the 17th most popular blog in the world (Technorati 2007).

However, these and similar blogs represent at best an "indirect" notion of public sphere

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[26] Moreover, popular blogs might act, precisely because of their communicative authority, as legitimizers or points of orientation: they might collect and translate posts from smaller "foreign" blogs, but the importance of this type of informaiton flow, measuring the openness of important blogs, could hardly even be guessed.

– i.e. various thoughts, ideas, originating on blogs, might inspire, stimulate various local public spheres or issue publics. Blogs can also contribute to the "global public sphere of credibility" (as conceived by Keohane and Nye (2002)), but their impact is hindered by two factors: first, the fragmentation of the blogosphere which means that most independent blogs have considerably small influence or importance, and second, by their limited "discursive resources," by which I refer to the lack of consequences stemming from or involved in their reading (or, for that matter, their production).

5.1.6 Questionable identities and reliability

Blogs are a textbook example of the uncertainty of identities – or roles – on the internet, as discussed under chapter 3.4. Both posting and commenting on blogs might happen anonymously or under pseudonyms, and / but it is possible to become a successful blogger – what's more, an opinion leader – under a fake name.

> Blog content that is appropriate or even funny for a friend can also be cause for dismissal to a supervisor or employer. To avoid the problem of colliding life spheres *(sic!)* and to protect personal privacy, many bloggers use a pseudonym to keep their offline life separated from their online thoughts. In fact, a bit more than half of bloggers (55%) surveyed say they blog under a pseudonym or made-up name, while 43% say they blog using their real name. (Pew 2006)

The choice of roles is, then, a practical matter, and this refers to the problems discussed in connection with the free-of-consequence nature of the internet: increased freedom when tackling censorship versus possibly undermined credibility.
The issue of credibility, however, is of peculiar importance here.

Credibility and reliability are often tied to the supposed independence of blogs. An ideal blog is not part of the media institution. But, as we have seen, the traditional media openly uses blogs, and there is no reason to believe that it doesn't use them covertly too, by running presumably independent, in reality corporately managed blogs.
But as I mentioned earlier, in my understanding the large number of blogs allows a thorough transparency to be established. Because of the multiplicity, the cross-referenced nature, and the open access to information sources, misinformation is bound to be quickly corrected (again, see Engadget's case with Apple – TechCrunch 2007).

Naturally, the question of reliability poses itself only in connection with the reporting or dissemination of news, but not in connection with discussion and the dissemination of opinion. In fact, in this latter case the dubious identity of participants in a discussion might work to the benefit of the quality of the debate, because it prevents the abuse of signs of authority – i.e. it is more important *what* somebody says as opposed to *who* they actually are; conditions of a debate on blogs are more equal than in real life. (I deal with this topic more extensively in chapter 5.4.) In summary, I am optimistic towards the reliability of blogs, even in spite of the factors (e.g. the uncertainty of identities) that suggest otherwise. **Considerable credibility is established by the large number and cross-referenced (transparent) nature of blogs**.

(On a side note, perhaps one sentence should be dedicated to hoax blogs (in the genre of 'literary mischiefs'), and to blogs that are the online versions of tabloids – and they are expected to be just as credible.)

5.1.7 The mode of consumption

Barriers to entry for potential blog readers are quite low, given that blogs are free and available from wherever, after one has established a connection to the internet (naturally, the language they are written in might pose an obstacle).
Returning briefly to Mills' criteria of a discursive community of publics (chapter 2.4), it can be seen that in the case of blogs there is, indeed, a balance between the ability to produce and to consume ideas, and the possibility of cooperation and maintaining a flow of communication via feedback is also granted. On the other hand, consumption (reading) a blog does not necessarily entail production (posting), and production does not necessarily entail consumption – which is an important difference between blogs and social news and bookmarking sites (see in chapter 5.2).

The two most important characteristics concerning the consumption of blogs is their quickness and their network-like nature – i.e. that they usually offer links to other websites[27] (blogs and conventional media sites too); and even if they wouldn't, the

[27] "Most blogs have a semi-permanent "blogroll," a list of links to other blogs that the author has chosen

internet immediately offers the possibility to search for additional pieces of info that would complement the ones offered in a blog post. If something is unclear, ambiguous or incorrect in an entry in a blog, one can easily get in touch with the writer to ask for clarification, make a comment or suggest a revision of the entry, and thanks to the search engines such as Google and Yahoo!, additional information concerning the topic of the entry could also be quickly gathered.

The characteristic of quickness refers both to the fact that blog entries are immediately available upon their publication, and the fact that their preparation does not require the lengthy procedure involved in traditional media publishing. No limitations of length have to be considered, news can be updated and modified on the fly (as it does happen often), and naturally there is no intermediary between publisher and consumer – such as printers and logistics providers in the case of paper-and-ink publications. Posting an item on a blog is also cheap: even in the case that the blog pays for the online storage of its documents, the publication of an additional post bears no new costs.

Quickness also entails that blogs can immediately notify their readers about new posts or updates to existing articles, as well as about new comments to the articles. This is done through the technology known as RSS (see chapter 5.3); and what it means is that, apart from the appearance of micro-blogging services such as Twitter (2007), **blogs represent the fastest existing way to disseminate information. Naturally, this speed is paired with a limited reach, but on the other hand these limitations of reach are not technological**.

5.1.8 Community; the possibilities of discussion

Speaking of contingencies, blogs certainly have the option to offer the possibility to readers to comment on the individual entries. Commenting might be tied to certain conditions; for example, the site might require – usually free of charge – registration, and the owner of the blog might decide to moderate – censor – comments. Naturally, comments can be shut down altogether, for example in the case when a blog becomes too popular, and attracts so many comments that the one-man team that is the owner of

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to make available to his or her readers. More importantly, bloggers' posts may contain links to other websites, including posts in other blogs." (Tremayne et al., 2006.)

the site could not keep track, let alone assist, the discussion going on in the comments. If the blog is relevant and referenced, it is safe to assume that discussions about the topic will develop anyway, in "nearby corners" of the web – meaning all the sites that would reference the particular blog in question. But this once again suggests that the blogosphere might easily become too fragmented for meaningful discourse to take place between several people.

However, one of the reasons traditional media outlets have started to use blogs might be that they provide the possibility of faster-than-ever feedback (offering both criticism and a source of valuable market information on the interests and opinions of the readers).

All the above points to the direction of a fragmented blogosphere, which in certain instances might provide useful information – feedback, critique, personal advice etc. –, but which can accommodate discussion and reasoned debate to a very limited extent.

However, even if we cannot speak of a community encompassing the whole of the blogosphere, it is perfectly possible that the audience of certain, specific, individual blogs could qualify as "community," e.g. by the criteria set up by Bender (see Galston 2002), and it is even conceivable that the formation of the community didn't precede the birth of the blog (i.e. the community was formed among participants in a discussion on a blog, and based entirely on this very discussion). But in general I downplay the importance of the voluntary communities spawn around blogs. The reason for this is that blogs' ideal type fits Galston's model (see chapter 3.4.3) in all but one respect: it is easier to exit from an argumentative discussion than to pursue an argument or admit to a revision of one's views (opinions do not have to confront one another); but blogs do not "foster mutual obligation" among members. In fact, we cannot even talk about "members" of a blog. There is an inequality in the authority of whoever posts or comments on a blog, because blogs have *authors,* who set the agenda and publish their opinion. A blog is almost always *someone's* blog. If we consider the blog and its audience a community, then there is one clear leader – the author –, who can easily control the agenda of (and (mis)behaviour in) discussions. Therefore it is inherent in the concept of blogs that norms of the discussion are not hammered out in mutual adjustment, but are aligned to the concepts of the blog's owner.) (See Galston 2002: 54.)

5.1.9 Blogs and the culture industry

The relationship between blogs and the culture industry could fit perfectly to the textbook definition of "ambivalence." As I proposed in chapter 3.5, I examine this relationship from two perspectives: first, whether blogs increase the availability of cultural products, and second, do they promote "layman criticism" or the pluralization of cultural value systems.

The short answer is "yes" to both of these questions. One could go as far as saying that criticism is the very purpose of blogs: "have a say, share with others how you see the world, show everyone what is important to you!" The point is exactly that one could freely and easily share his or her thoughts with the largest possible audience, without having to abide by any kind of perceived intellectual authority. This in itself, as I noted before, has ambivalent effects: it does provide a new kind of freedom of speech (writing) to tackle censorship or the bias of conventional media against e.g. a minority, but the easiness of starting one's own blog also means that, in case of a difference of opinion, it might be easier to start a new blog than to engage in reasoned debate with someone else on another blog. (Leaving a debate and starting one's own blog might also be a preferred method because this latter option provides – supposedly – greater visibility to the thoughts published.)

This suggests a trend of a constantly growing blogosphere, and one that is, once again, fragmented. As for the reliability of the layman criticism offered on/by blogs, all the factors I detailed in chapter 5.1.7 apply. I would especially like to stress the point about the uncertainty of identities, which on the one hand means that participants of a discussion are on more equal terms than in real life, because the role of real-life authoritative factors (such as age, gender, profession, qualifications etc.) is to a great extent eliminated from an online discourse, but which, consequently, also means that everybody can pose as an expert. And while the cross-referenced and entangled nature of the blogosphere helps fact-checking in the case of news, it cannot work just as effectively when it comes to justifying or substantiating opinions about the cultural values of cultural products.

At the same time, blogs are undoubtedly an excellent platform for promoting these products of the culture industry, especially movies and music. Such products can be

consumed right in front of the computer, and blogs might offer easy, often illegal, access to them. If a blog publishes a critique about a new album or a movie, it can easily be arranged that the sound or video files are hosted on the blog itself, or that the blog shows its readers where to download the files in question. The cross-linked and searchable nature of blogs mean that the whole of the blogosphere could be viewed as a hopelessly unorganized but vast database, and in this database, if someone is willing to lend some authority to blog sources of questionable trustworthiness, it is easy to find an armada of cultural products.

Do these two effects offset one another? No. Rather, in my opinion, they work in parallel, as far as the culture industry is concerned, in opposite directions, but as far as the public sphere is concerned, towards the same end: fragmentation and relativization.

5.1.10 Summary: blogs

The term "blog" refers to a certain *form* of publishing online information. Traditional media enterprises might use blogs as well as companies not involved in the media, private persons, non-profit organizations or states – whoever. Hence, blogs can and do have very diverse contents: opinion pieces, articles of scientific information, personal experiences, news items, unsolicited business offers or advertising material (spam) – etc. The term "blog" is often used in a restricted meaning, referring to personal, independent websites. The majority of such independent blogs are not business undertakings; the ones that are usually produce revenues from placing advertising on the surface of the website.

Traditional media also uses blogs in the attempt of covering topics of niche interest, expressing an opinion and offering means for readers to get directly involved in the discussion that is taking place in the particular media product. Given the difficulties involved in first-hand news reporting, independent blogs might have an important role in the dissemination and secondary processing of news (they reach their readers much faster than traditional print media), but not in the first-hand reporting of news.

Since the barriers to entry are extremely low – anybody can start a blog with just a few clicks of the mouse –, the number of blogs in existence is large – however, the majority of blogs are abandoned shortly after their start. The blogosphere is, then, considerably fragmented, with only a handful of blogs acting as important points of orientation, or

the influential inner core of the blogosphere.

Blogs can be "global" only in the very restricted term of the word (connecting "issue publics"), and in my view it would be a mistake to regard the blogosphere as some kind of an alternative global public sphere. This is partly because of the questionable nature of identities and credibility of blogs and bloggers (even though, in my view, the cross-referenced blogosphere, providing easy access to information, renders fact checking in connection with news items considerably easy and establishes transparency within the blogosphere), and partly because of the fact that argumentative discussion on blogs is discouraged: not only is it easier to set up one's own blog than to bother arguing with someone else, it also provides tangible consequence (one's own blog), as opposed to the inconsequential words posted in a commentary to another blog's post.

From the point of view of the culture industry, blogs produce ambivalent effects: they increase the availability of cultural products (legally or illegally), and at the same time they promote layman criticism; both of these trends promote the fragmentation of the blogosphere and a relativization of value systems cultural products should be judged by.

However, even if the blogosphere as such cannot automatically be regarded as part of the public sphere, certain individual blogs could, in my view, take an important role in directly influencing the discursive creation of "soft power," by addressing issues of credibility, upon which, according to Keohane and Nye, the operations of modern politics are based upon (Keohane and Nye 2002).

In fact I arrived at the view that "blog" is too large, too diverse category for a detailed analysis trying to assess their contribution to the public sphere. The difference between professional blogs that do not look like blogs at all, and personal blogs that only their owner reads, are too big, even if some of the underlying concepts are the same. For sure, the tools are readily available to help the dissemination and secondary procession – discussion, debate – of news and opinion. In the case of certain, influential blogs, this can be proven working, but the large number of blogs suggests that these few examples represent only the tip of the iceberg.

5.2 Social bookmarking and news sites

5.2.1 The concept

The common principle in the operation of these websites could be phrased as follows: if you find something you like on the internet, let others know about it. Ideally, communities could be built around the "social" treatment of information on the web, and these communities could act as editors of the flows of information available online.

In this paper I distinguish between two basic types of these web services: social bookmarking sites (such as del.icio.us) and social news sites (such as Digg). The distinction is somewhat arbitrary, because the working mechanism of these two types of sites are often very similar, if not the same. But such "social content" sites tend to define themselves as either one or the other, and this self-definition encourages users to use the sites in significantly different manner. But what are these, after all?

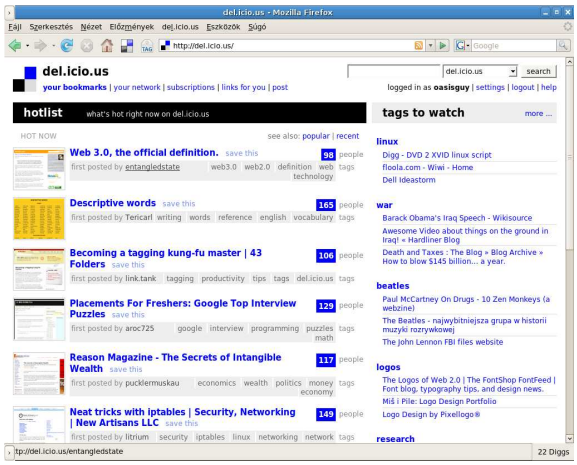

***Figure 1**: The front page of del.icio.us*

Social bookmarking means saving the address of interesting websites, or pieces of websites (e.g. pictures or other individual files) and describing these websites with the help of freely chosen keywords (tags). The resulting package of information is simply called a bookmark: it tells you where to find a particular site and what you can expect to find there. Since the bookmarks are stored on the web server that powers the bookmarking site, they can be accessed from any computer that is connected to the internet[28]. What makes this bookmarking social is that all users have access to all other users' public bookmarks (one can decide whether to save a particular bookmark as public or private). Everyone can browse and search other people's bookmarks, and it is possible to have a

[28] A tremendous advantage if one is doing research work in several places, e.g. using both a home computer and computers in a library – no need to scribble long and difficult web addresses onto pieces of paper that eventually *always* get lost somehow.

discussion about the bookmarks themselves directly on the bookmarking website.

The idea behind this is that searching in a database of links that is compiled by humans can complement the search in databases that are compiled by algorithms (such as the database of Google) – because of the underlying assumption that people will only bookmark links that point to relevant and high quality content[29]. In the case of del.icio.us in particular, one can also subscribe to certain tags – meaning that one gets automatically notified of all the bookmarks that get saved under the specified tags in the future. This means that there is no need to search for bookmarks with the same tags over and over again just in order to keep up-to-date regarding a certain topic. Let, say social bookmarking sites, others do the searching.

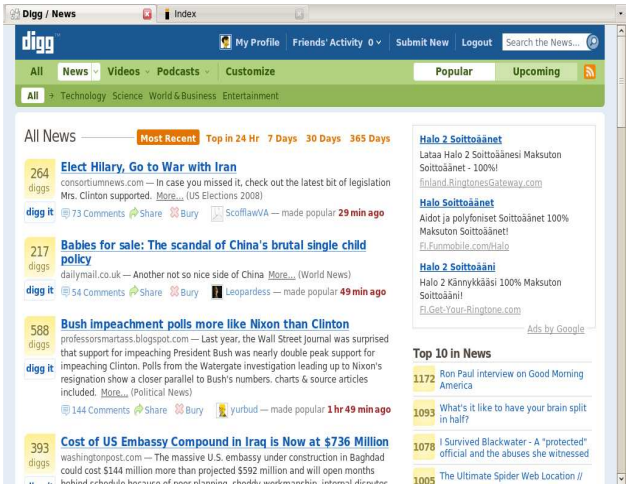

***Figure 2**: The front page of Digg*

Social news sites such as Digg (http://www.digg.com) or Reddit (http://www.reddit.com) are also based on user-submitted content, decidedly focusing on news items and putting a more pronounced emphasis on the discussion about the submitted news items. Importantly, the users of social news sites can express both their like as well as their dislike for an article. In the case of Digg, one can see the list and a brief summary of the submitted articles, and can can decide whether to "digg" (vote for) or "bury" (vote against) a particular item. The constantly refreshed list of the most popular articles is published on the main page of the site – which then acts as a news site in its own right –, and the entries submitted are usually filed into different categories such as world news, political opinion, science etc. The submitted articles can freely be commented upon; it is in this "comments area" where discussion is expected to develop. Submitted items could be textual articles, but also video or audio files, for example

[29] Not to mention the fact that such links can also be bookmarked that are missed or ranked low in the popular search engines.

"podcasts," or pre-recorded radio shows that are disseminated on the internet. In addition, social news sites might offer the possibility to rate not only the submitted items themselves but also the comments that make up the discussion about the articles.

Social news sites are not to be mistaken for sites that promote citizen journalism – such as Korea-based international *OhMyNews* (http://english.ohmynews.com), where users are expected to submit their own, original articles which are then edited by a professional team of editorial staff. *Newsvine* (http://www.newsvine.com) is a combination of such grassroots citizen journalism and social news sites, insofar as there is a more pronounced emphasis on the submission of original articles than in the case of Digg or Reddit, but articles are judged by the community, not a designated editorial staff.

***Figure 3**: Digg Arc*

Both in the case of social news and bookmarking sites, owners or managers of the site may naturally exercise rights to moderate – censor – the submitted items, e.g. not to allow links to illegal or offensive contents, and to prevent copyright infringement by citing an item that is not allowed to be cited.

It is noteworthy that broadband internet connections and the spread of the so-called flash technology[30] allow new ways to visually represent the constantly changing contents of a website – such as a social news site. For example in the case of Digg Arc (*Figure 3*) – a free application available from the homepage of Digg – news items are represented as coloured segments of a circle; the more popular the piece if news is, the longer its segment. The picture is updated in real time, and it can be stopped at any time so that the user can browse among the articles. Users can also follow in real time which stories are being "dugg" and buried, in other spectacular visualizations (http://labs.digg.com).

This feature of social news sites does not necessarily help discussion about the news

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30 "A multimedia authoring and playback system from Adobe. [...] Flash became popular for its animated graphics. Responsible for much of the animations, advertisements and video components found on today's Web sites, the Flash Player is a free client application that works with popular Web browsers." (TechEncyclopedia 2007.)

items. But it does help usability (having visual signposts in the armada of news items is a positive asset), and it can be one feature that attracts users to use the site – and the viewership of the site is indeed important, from reasons to be detailed later.

5.2.2 The content

In this paper, I will focus on two social content websites: *Digg* and *del.icio.us*, because presently these are the most-visited, most popular ones of such web services (PEJ 2007). However, they only represent the tip of the iceberg. According to web traffic analyst site Alexa (2007a, 2007b), at the time of writing this paper Digg is the 106th most popular website of the world, attracting 0,6-0,8% of the web's traffic every day, while del.icio.us is in the 262nd position, with roughly 0,4% of the daily web traffic passing through it. But there are many more social news and bookmarking sites of lesser importance: Markaboo.com, Ma.gnolia.com, Furl and Stimpy, to name but a few; not mentioning the local interpretations translated versions of the most popular sites. And since these sites maintain only a few barriers to the contents that users upload, it could be established that the contents of such sites are extremely diverse.

However, according to a recent report by research organization "Project for Excellence in Journalism," **one common feature of the contents of social news and bookmarking sites is that they differ significantly from the contents offered by mainstream media.** PEJ's research analysed during a one-week period the most popular contents of Digg, Reddit (the second-biggest user news site) and del.icio.us, as well as mainstream news site Yahoo! News, and cross-matched these contents to the news agenda of the offline mainstream media in the U.S. (considering 48 various news outlets, TV and radio channels as well as daily and weekly newspapers). (PEJ 2007.)

On the week of June 24 – 29, 2007, main stories on the agenda of mainstream media dealt with a political debate over immigration (representing 10% of all news stories in PEJ's compilation of news, referred to as News Coverage Index), a fire near Lake Tahoe (6%), a failed terrorist attack in the U.K. (6%), and events in Iraq (6%). The top 10 stories that week accounted for 51% of all the stories in the News Coverage Index, but:

> [i]n the user-generated sites, these stories were barely visible. Overall, just 5% of the stories captured on these three sites overlapped with the ten most widely-covered stories in the Index (13% for Reddit, 4% for Digg, and 0% for Del.icio.us). (PEJ 2007: 4.)

In contrast, it was technology–related entries that dominated the social bookmarking and news sites: e.g. the launch of Apple's iPhone. However, "domination" might only refer to the broad category of news, but not to individual news items because, unsurprisingly, the news coverage of social news sites proved to be considerably fragmented. According to PEJ's report, the only event that was covered by popular news items on more than one day was the iPhone-launch. (PEJ 2007: 2–4.)

Social content sites also differ from traditional media outlets in the sources they use: "[a]bout seven in ten (70%) stories on del.icio.us, Reddit and Digg, originally appeared on blogs and sites that generally offer very little news." Forty percent of all stories submitted originated on blogs, and only 25% of the entries referenced to the mainstream media (such as BBC News or the online Slate magazine). In addition, 1% of the stories appeared as original reporting. (PEJ 2007: 4–5.)

On the website of Yahoo! News, even when picking from a limited list of stories that was already filtered and trimmed down by editors of the site, users' top stories only rarely matched those of professionals. PEJ compared the front page section of the site with its "most viewed," "most e-mailed" and "most recommended" list: most viewed stories generally tended to be the most sensationalist news, while the most e-mailed and most recommended articles were usually concerned with foreign politics, or offered lifestyle-related, or otherwise useful advice. (PEJ 2007: 11–13.)

The report also found that, contrary to expectations of the web internationalizing the news diet of media consumers, popular items on the social content sites focused mostly on domestic events – even more than the traditional media (PEJ 2007: 2).

The analysis leads to a carefully phrased conclusion, stating that at the moment those who rely on user-generated news and bookmarking sites are just a fraction of those attracted by the mainstream media (and these two sets might overlap to same extent), but it is now beyond doubt that "**user-driven sites have entered the news business, or perhaps more accurately, they have entered the news dissemination business**" (PEJ 2007: 2, 14).

Concerning the above analysis, I first have to comment that I don't fully agree with its practice of putting del.icio.us in the same basket as Digg and Reddit. These latter are decidedly news sites; they offer a front page with various categories of articles to

browse, list of topics etc. In contrast, del.icio.us merely offers a "What's hot?" list, showing the bookmarks that in the past hours have been saved by most users of the site. In addition, I suspect there is a marked difference in how these various sites are used.
The point of saving a bookmark is that with its help, one can return to a certain website later, i. e. there is an expectation that the information stored on the website will be relevant days, weeks, months or even years later. This long-term aspect is missing from the concept of *news*: there is, as the saying goes, nothing less worthwhile than yesterday's newspaper. Of course in some cases it might be relevant to bookmark certain articles – e.g. in conducting research –, but in my understanding bookmarking rather concerns *news websites* as such (in the expectation that they might provide interesting news in the future), but not individual *news items*. The situation is the opposite for of user news sites: the point there is to submit individual pieces of news, not whole websites as such.
This is part of the reason why bookmarks on social bookmarking sites tend to link to websites with higher perceived usability, but lower news value. Tutorials, opinion pieces and other instances of static information are more suitable for being bookmarked than news items – indeed, PEJ's report confirms that these latter only constitute under 5% of popular bookmarks on del.icio.us (PEJ 2007: 7, 9).

Second, I think it would be a mistake to draw, from the findings of the PEJ report, the conclusion that internet users are not interested in what is covered by the mainstream media. Partly because, as the report itself states, the sample and the scope of analysis was considerably small, and it might also have been distorted by the fact that Digg- and Reddit-users tend to be interested in technology more than the average in the first place (this is *why* they became Digg- and Reddit-users). But I also think that the most popular user-submitted topics suggest disinterest in news *which were already covered anyway.*
In my reading, the figures of the PEJ-report indicate an underlying principle in the concept of user news sites: the idea of helping the underdogs in the mass media flow, or promoting articles which are deemed interesting but which do not get enough attention from traditional media outlets. Even the mere popularity of user news sites points in this direction; after all, who would want to visit a site which provides all the information that one has already heard on tv or the radio and read about in the daily paper?

However, I agree with the final conclusion of the PEJ report (2007: 14), namely that further and deeper analysis would be necessary to assess the reasons behind and implications of the contents of user news sites. Until then we can only safely state that these contents, as well as their sources, are fragmented, and they tend to differ largely from those of the mainstream media output.

Analysing the contents of the most popular social news and bookmarking sites from the perspective of the culture industry, it is telling that neither Digg nor Reddit features "culture" or "arts" as news category (in the case of del.icio.us this is not a problem, of course, because tags, describing the submitted bookmarks, are freely defined by the users). On the other hand, both of them do feature an "entertainment" category. I find such an organization of things troubling. Given the free availability of space on the internet, and the fact that pages can be personalized (no one has to read through categories of news (s)he is not interested in), there seems to be no reason for the omission of art-related categories.

One might think that the reason lies in the post-modern, popular view of Digg and Reddit on culture (or, in Eagletonian terms, *Culture*) – but at least in the case of Digg I strongly doubt this, not least because of the fact that none of the sub-categories under "entertainment" would be fit for accommodating news items about theatre, literature or fine arts[31]. The most popular story at the time of writing this paper, that contains the word "art," is a collection of pictures of works by street graphic artists. Interestingly, it is filed under the "Design" sub-category of "Technology" (Digg 2007c).

Naturally, the set-up of categories might be explained by Digg's strategy not to target all audiences, but rather younger – and technology-oriented – users, who might not be expected to be interested in arts and culture related news. It is expected that once user news sites become more popular, others sites will appear dealing in the distribution of these more "mature" news items.

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[31] There are four sub-categories of "entertainment" in Digg: "Celebrity," "Movies," "Music" and "Television." (Perhaps not accidentaly, Adorno referred to the film industry as being the "central sector in culture industry" (2001: 100).) On the other hand, both Digg and Reddit deal extensively with computer games also, which, according to Hesmondhalgh (2002: 12) belong to the products of the culture industry. Machin and Leeuwen (2007) share his view, and I agree with it myself.

5.2.3 The business model

User content sites produce revenues from publishing advertising on the same website, for which they are a very apt surface, because adverts can be highly accurately targeted. Taking, again, the example of Digg, registration involves creating a user profile, which will keep track which articles on has read, voted for or submitted. Advertisers can target their offers based on these profile data, trying to make sure that people will only be exposed to ads they might genuinely be interested in (Digg 2007).

However, the nature of user content sites puts their owners into a risky position: with a large number of users constantly posting new items, owners will only have limited control over what gets published on the web page. The business interests of the companies behind the sites might dictate that at least on the outside, on the front pages, the items submitted should suggest an image about the company that is coherent with what advertisers would like to see. This dilemma advocates the so-called "mullet strategy." Trimmed in the front and loose in the back, social content sites do best by taming their most visible image (the front pages), while also allowing users to freely discuss and debate in the back, e.g. in the contents that are attached to entries, and in other areas that are not immediately visible upon visiting the site. (BuzzFeed 2007.)

Advertising might only be a partial source of revenue for social content sites. Digg, as an independent company, is entirely advertising-driven, but Reddit is owned by worldwide publisher of traditional and electronic publications Condé Nast (Condé Nast 2007), and del.icio.us is owned by online content provider and search engine giant Yahoo! (del.icio.us 2007). Although control over the exact contents of the sites is maintained by their clients, the owners, in line with the mullet strategy, might also use these sites to promote material furthering their own business interests.

5.2.4 Social content sites and the media institution

Social news sites do not directly provide own content – indirectly, as alluded to above, they might do so. Consequently, they rely on other media outlets for material.

As the analysis of the PEJ-group shows (2007: 4–5), 70% of the most popular entries on user-driven news sites originate from blogs and other alternative sources that provide little news content (which gives a slight twist to the word "news" in the the term "social news site"). But of course this does not mean that the role of traditional news media

wouldn't be important! As I have stated before (chapter 5.1), the blogosphere is rather a sphere of dissemination and secondary news processing, than a sphere of original news and first hand reporting – which, in turn, means that it has to be traditional media sources that provide raw material for the blogs themselves.

Therefore, in my interpretation, the PEJ-analysis indicates that **social news sites *complement* traditional media sources, instead of aiming at their replacement**. Neither do I think that this would significantly change with a possible massive surge in the number of audiences of such websites. Firstly because first-hand news reporting is a resource-demanding business undertaking, and one that requires the tight cooperation of an editorial staff, not the very loose cooperation of a cast of thousands. And secondly because, in my view, **there is a clear, functional upper limit on the growth of the number of users of social news sites: more users mean more submitted stories, which in turn is expected to lead to an ever more fragmented coverage of news**[32]. (In March 2007, Digg grew to over 1 million registered users (Digg 2007a), and yet most popular items in a week's time receive merely 3 – 5 thousands diggs.)

5.2.5 Globality and goodness of fit

As the PEJ-report also claims, social news sites tend to focus on domestic issues, and this could presumably be true about their local incarnations too (such as fledgeling Digg-clones *Linkter* (http://www.linkter.hu) or *Kerro.fi*). Similarly to blogs, the language of the site can be an implicit regulator of the goodness of fit.

On the other hand, social news sites provide the opportunity to present stories from a more global approach, e.g. by citing articles about well publicized events from alternative, foreign sources. And of course if one is able to overcome the language obstacle, they can also have a say, influence the discussion and the contents of the website. And it is this influence that is the key here; coupled with Digg's attempts to take the image of a conventional news site.

Simply, **it does matter what gets to the front page of Digg or Reddit.** It does matter,

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[32] On the other hand, just because a news item does not get immediately popular, it usually stays for considerable time available on the social news site, and as long as it is available, it can also be discussed on the site. However, I think that from the point of view of the public sphere, whether or not something has a real chance of getting on the front page of a social news site is of crucial importance – as I explain under 5.2.5.

because the front page is the most visible for users and for non-registered visitors of the site as well (usually visitors do not have to register to be able to view the contents of the websites; registration is only necessary for voting on the news items). And this means that **talk and actions on such websites do have consequences.**

Some might say there is no point in arguing in a conventional discussion forum or in a blog's comments area, but this is not the case here: on social news websites, every single vote counts towards a certain piece of news getting in the centre of attention, and it is worth making explanatory comments and arguing, because one can modify his or her points of view easily, in the light of the comments attached to an article[33]. The "comments system" of Digg is especially interesting: comments themselves can be rated positively or negatively, and it can be set that Digg lists the comments ordered by the number of positive votes they received – this means that more positively rated (supposedly: better phrased, more accurate, more valid, snappier) comments will be listed closer to the article, and thereby they might have a bigger effect on subsequent voters. A very elegant way of promoting reasoned debate, in my view: if your arguments are rated high, they might be significantly more influential than if they are rated low, e.g. for being offensive or narrow-minded.

(This is why I suppose there is an upper limit to the usability of social news sites. Too small audience renders such a site insignificant, but too many users – unmanageably many stories and comments – render the individual voice insignificant.)

***Figure 4**: Comments on Digg*

The consequence of good argumentation on a social news website is not tied to any institution (apart from the website itself), and such a consequence is outside the realms of formal or procedural democracy. **But it really can, in my view, help *substantial democracy*, in the exact Habermasian sense**. This is the promise of

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[33] Votes are not final in the case of Digg: "dugg" articles can be "undugg" and buried articles can be "unearthed" and voted for.

social news sites – contingent on the competence of their users, and their willingness to put "their reason to public use."

5.2.6 On the identity of users and the reliability of social content sites

Because of their different uses and different attitudes towards shared contents, I distinguish here, too, between social bookmarking sites and social news sites. I focus on these latter first. What does credibility mean in connection with social news sites?

On one hand, credibility could be understood in relation to the individual entries, articles posted. This is not a simple issue: **articles might become popular on a social news website in spite of their lack of credibility – or in fact, *because* of their total incredibility, their – perceived – blatant lies or stupidity, which then can be mocked, criticized and made fun of.** But if this is so, then this fact can be pointed out in the comments attached to the article, and the reliability of the individual articles can be, in the manner I have described in the case of blogs, cross-checked on the internet.

On the other hand, the notion of credibility could be examined in relation to the social news site as a whole, in line with the expectations that such a site should provide a more balanced representation of news than traditional media does (because here the editors – i. e. the audience – have no vested interest in the contents of the site). This does not mean that a social news site is not expected to feature news items from the traditional mass media – but the idea is that a supposedly open-minded and interest-free audience could apply some kind of a filter to the flow of media output, picking out the best available articles. It could, with Dahlgren's terms, act as part of the *advocacy media*; and this is a way in which social news sites could fulfil a role in the public sphere.

It is the latter interpretation of credibility that I turn to here.

If a social news site wants to be a legitimate part of the advocacy media, then it should reflect some kind of a popular – public – opinion and interest, which in the first place means that entries should be given attention because readers find them interesting, but not because some hidden business interest. Admittedly, this is not always the case – there is for instance no way to make sure whether or not someone is voting for or against an article that (s)he actually read. (See Seopedia 2007.)

Vote rigging – hiring registered users at a social news site to promote certain news

items, making them look more interesting than they actually are – is also possible. Sites such as User/Submitter (http://www.usersubmitter.com) act as intermediaries between submitters (of phoney stories, e.g. badly disguised advertising), and users (e.g. of Digg), with these latter being paid a small sum after each vote they cast on the submitted story. Digg claims that it is capable of filtering phoney votes (Digg 2007b). On the other hand, according to an experiment carried out by a journalist on behalf of *Wired* magazine, vote rigging is indeed possible. (The fact that Wired is also tied, through its owner, to Digg's main rival Reddit, does not alter the conclusion of the article itself, it merely suggests, somewhat awkwardly, that Reddit could just as well be hacked.) However, it is expected that once a story gets popular – it receives enough rigged votes to be put on the front page –, and hence it receives a lot of interest, it will finally be up to the larger community of Digg to decide if it can stay there for much longer. And, importantly, most members of this larger community have no vested interest in voting for uninteresting stories (unlike the corrupted voters who helped the story get on the front page). (Newitz 2007.)

Taking a look from another perspective, is it possible for the owners of a social news site to affect the flow of news? It certainly is; as I mentioned previously, it is customary to moderate submitted items in order not to publish anything illegal or offensive. Besides, in line with the mullet strategy, there might be other reasons as well to restrict the freedom of the editorial community. Having said that, the following case study illustrates that even the owners' own hands can be tied after the users of the site gather a critical mass.

On April 30th, 2007, a user posted a news item on Digg: a message which contained the encryption key to the digital rights management application of the HD-DVD standard[34]. Digg promptly removed the story from its site:

> We've been notified by the owners of this intellectual property [the encryption key in question], that they believe the posting of the encryption key infringes their intellectual property rights. In order to respect these rights and to comply with the law, we have removed postings of the key that have been brought to our attention. (Digg 2007d)

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[34] Knowing this encryption key allows programmers to crack the copy protection mechanism of HD-DVDs, and thus to make illegal copies of movies and video games that are burnt onto HD-DVD

However, the news, apparently of great importance to a significant part of the Digg-community, resurfaced over and over again, not only in the form is simple news items, but also in photo montages or disguised in other forms. It became clear that users did not tolerate censorship in this case, even though the Advanced Access Content Systems group (AACS), the owner of the encryption key, threatened to pursue lawsuits against everybody who contributed to spreading it (Waters 2007). Managers of Digg could either choose to face a lawsuit or to lose the confidence and support of their users. They chose the first option: one day after the previous statement, Digg founder Kevin Rose declared in the company's blog that the site is not giving in to the legal threats of AACS.

> [A]fter seeing hundreds of stories and reading thousands of comments, you've made it clear. You'd rather see Digg go down fighting than bow down to a bigger company. We hear you, and effective immediately we won't delete stories or comments containing the code and will deal with whatever the consequences might be. (Digg 2007e)

This example illustrates that social news sites with considerably large readership can effectively tackle the problem of vote-rigging and the unwanted influence of the "official" editorial staff; the credibility of news items, insofar as they represent points of genuine interest, can be safeguarded. The malevolent, deliberate hacking of social news sites is highly unlikely to succeed in the medium or long run.

But this is only part of the problem. Whether such sites can provide relevant, high-standard advocacy media is the function of the competence and social sensitivity of their users. A user news site might accurately reflect public opinion, or at least topics that public opinion finds interesting, but this does not mean that these topics, or their cited coverage, would constitute a meaningful alternative to the output of traditional media. Or, in Habermas' words, issues reflected upon in user news sites might not be among the "relevant issues" from the point of view of the political public sphere.

However pessimistic this sounds, I do believe that user news sites are a welcome effect of the internet on the public sphere. Reiterating a previous point: their solution is not "perfect" solution. But they certainly offer an opportunity, what's more, they **strongly encourage conducting meaningful, consequential discussion about topical issues**.

Slightly different considerations apply for the reliability of social bookmarking sites.
Since the primary function of these sites is to manage one's bookmarks in an easy-to-use and accessible manner, the rating of each other's bookmarks, even if present as a feature of the site, carries no such weight as in the case of social news sites. The underlying assumption is that all bookmarks are relevant, otherwise there would be no point in saving them for one's own use. Therefore, establishing how credible a particular bookmarked site is, is down to individual judgement.
It is certainly possible to hack these sites in similar ways as social news sites, but I downplay the importance of this practice, because here users have no incentive to bookmark links they consider useless. The "front page" or "what's hot" page of social bookmarking sites lacks the "front page quality" of news sites – it is rather just an assorted, random list of possibly interesting things from the web. In addition, the bookmarking of useless links is discouraged by the fact that the more bookmarks one has, the harder it is to organize and keep track of them.
Therefore it can be claimed that the contents of social bookmarking sites represent genuine interest, but without the idea that these contents should represent some kind of advocacy media. These sites are rather a **loose gauge of opinion**.

5.2.7 On the mode of consumption

Social bookmarking and news sites are very fast when it comes to the dissemination of news, given their extensive staff – that is, audience. Of course the submission of a certain news item does not guarantee that it will get on the front page, and I also showed how today's social news sites differ in their contents from the conventional media.
In fact, the usability of such websites is strongly tied to the number of users: if there is an abundance of submitted, upcoming stories, it becomes hard to find the ones that are really worthwhile of a positive vote. It is helpful if these stories can be arranged into various categories, or filtered through pre-defined filters regarding the contents or source of the news items. Digg's practice, that the stories buried become invisible for the person that buried them, but stay visible for everyone else, also helps to establish an ease-of-use.

Part of the consumption of social content sites, and especially social news sites, is

discussion. In contrast with blogs, and referring back to C.W. Mills, here the production and the consumption of ideas imply one another; they happen simultaneously. If I read an article on a social news sites, I have three options: vote *for* the article, vote *against* the article, or abstain from voting – and whichever of these I choose influences whether or not the story ends up (or stays) on the front page of the site.

Posting a comment on the story further enhances this influence; the primary function of discussion is to provide a framework for the argumentation about the items posted. As mentioned earlier, comments can also be rated, and offensive comments, or ones that are judged to be spam, can be removed. I underlined in chapter 5.2.5, how the comments system can, in the case of a social news site, encourage reasoned, argumentative debate – and also that the limitations concerning the size of audience concern the comments as well: **discussion can only be relevant if its scope and the number of its participants stays manageable**. Theoretically there is no barrier on the growth of social network sites, but practically, from the point of usability, there indeed is one – however, further substantial research is required for establishing where exactly this barrier is, and what is the optimal size of a social news site audience is.

As for social bookmarking sites, their modes of consumption hold no particular implications for the public sphere. As the example of del.icio.us illustrates, they can be seamlessly integrated into an ordinary web browser; one can just as easily use a social bookmarking site "unconsciously."

5.2.8 Social contents and the culture industry

I have found that Digg, and Reddit, the most popular social news sites consider the culture industry non-existent, or at best something roughly equating to celebrity news and gossip, Hollywood and popular music (see chapter 5.2.2). But I would argue that even if this was not the case, the role of social news sites would be considerably smaller than that of social bookmarking sites, in affecting the culture industry. This is because cultural products usually differ from disposable, ephemeral news items, insofar as these former are meant to be enjoyed not instantly, but over a longer period of time. Cultural products are not news items.

The role social bookmarking sites play in the promotion of the culture industry is similar to that of blogs: free choice, without regards to external intellectual authority is encouraged (you should bookmark the links you yourself find interesting), and at the same time, it is easy to find consumable (downloadable) cultural products in the network of bookmarked links.

On most social bookmarking sites there is at least some kind of indication of the popularity of a certain website – for example in del.icio.us upon bookmarking a link, it can be seen how many other people had bookmarked it before. But, importantly, one can only express like or dislike towards bookmarks that he or she saved – it is *formally* impossible to argue about something that was not bookmarked. Since bookmarking is an activity which serves the bookmarker's own interests – quite in the same way as traditional, offline, "book-based" bookmarking serves the interests of the reader –, it can be assumed that those who bookmark a certain website are all in favour of it; that in this respect, there is a coherence of opinion among bookmarkers. This, in turn, significantly lowers the chance of a reasoned debate to spring to life about the merits or artistic value of an artist or a particular work of art. Therefore I am inclined to say that social bookmarking sites further deepen the fragmentation of the cultural public sphere, as they promote the birth of loosely tied groups of like-minded individuals.

Once again, it is important to emphasize that there are all sorts of discussion forums on the internet, concerning various products of the culture industry: conventional, textual forums as well as applications like Last.fm (http://www.last.fm), where people can listen to music online and become part of a community that is organized by music taste. But the point of these sites is not to promote *reasoned debate*, at least not nearly as effectively as social news sites do. However, as I noted earlier, with the growth and development of social content sites as such, it is expected that either the most popular sites will open up to the culture industry, or that separate sites will be born, focusing exclusively of culture-related news items. But these are still expected to focus on works of art only indirectly, because these latter seldom have news value, and seldom have the short expiry date news items have. This is important, because it is precisely the news value and the short lifespan of news items that enables social news sites to function in the first place: voting and argumentation about a particular news item is important

because this will decide what gets on the front page from the constantly renewing, overwhelming flow of information.

5.2.9 Summary

Following the distinction I pursued throughout this chapter, first I turn my attention to social bookmarking sites and then to social news sites, when summarizing and evaluating their contribution to the public sphere.

As for social bookmarking sites, their relevance seems considerably smaller, given the ways they are meant to be used. They help finding relevant information – but the "relevance" here is defined very loosely, and following individual preferences and judgement. I am convinced that social bookmarking is a very useful *personal* activity, but that doesn't mean that such sites would be promoting reasoned discourse. They do not directly contribute to either the political or the cultural public sphere in a meaningful way.

Social news sites fell in a different category. As we have seen from the analysis of the Project for Excellence in Journalism research organization, their contents complement that of traditional media output, and hence they establish a setting that could accommodate an alternative media sphere – using Dahlgren's term, an advocacy media. This is not carried out by first hand news reporting, but by secondary procession of existing media sources, by filtering these sources in a more balanced way than the conventional media.

Social news sites are reliable in the sense that their contents reflect genuine interest from their members, and they also promote constructive, argumentative discussion among their members. Therefore they do contribute positively to the public sphere.

This advocacy media might not be relevant to larger groups of society, or perfect in any sense; it might exclude the representation of minority groups that, given the unequal access to the internet or other barriers to entry such as the language, cannot take advantage of its services. Social news sites are indeed limited both in their reach and in their use; they are sites are no panacea, and their role will always be the function of the (in)competence of their users. But within these limitations they come much closer to the ideal advocacy media than it would be possible for conventional media institutions.

However, their beneficial role can only manifest if the size of the audience is in an optimal range: big enough so that a large amount of content is continuously submitted, big enough so that the front page of the website becomes meaningful by its popularity, but not too big, because that would render discussion impossible and the news coverage uselessly fragmented. (Where this "optimal range" stretches could be the subject of further studies.)

5.3 RSS and personalized starting pages

I dedicate this sub-chapter to the description of two important pieces of technology, changing the way online available information is consumed. These are: the RSS (Really Simple Syndication), and the personalized, information-aggregating starting pages.

5.3.1 The concept – and the mode of consumption

Approaching from the point of view of users, RSS is a technology that delivers the contents of websites to users *without* the users themselves having to visit the site.
How does this work in practice?
Users subscribe to the RSS-feed of a website, using a so-called RSS reader application. This application might be a separate piece of desktop software, an integrated part of an e-mail client (such as MS Outlook), or part of a website. Through this established feed, the website publishes information every time it is updated. For example, as is customary with blogs or news sites, if a new article is published on a news site, its headline, lead or brief summary is sent out to the RSS-subscribers. The feeds are updated automatically, and users can, in their RSS reader, see all the updates from all the different sources in one place. Thereby they can in real time monitor the contents of all potentially interesting websites. And if a certain article looks interesting, the user can just click on the item in the RSS reader and immediately get transported to the website itself, where the whole article can be found. (Cf. TechEncyclopedia 2007.)
Using an RSS-reader makes browsing more convenient (users won't have to visit their favorite websites just to find out that nothing changed on them) and faster (users are notified immediately of the updates). **The flow of information is reversed: the user does not need to visit the website – because the website visits the user.**

Personalized starting homepages help collecting and organizing RSS feeds, and also scores of other applications that users might find useful. Picking and mixing from the available applications and sources of information, users can create their personalized starting page. Information on what constitutes such a starting page is stored on a server of the service provider, which means in practice that the page can be accessed not only from one's own computer, but from wherever there is an internet connection available.

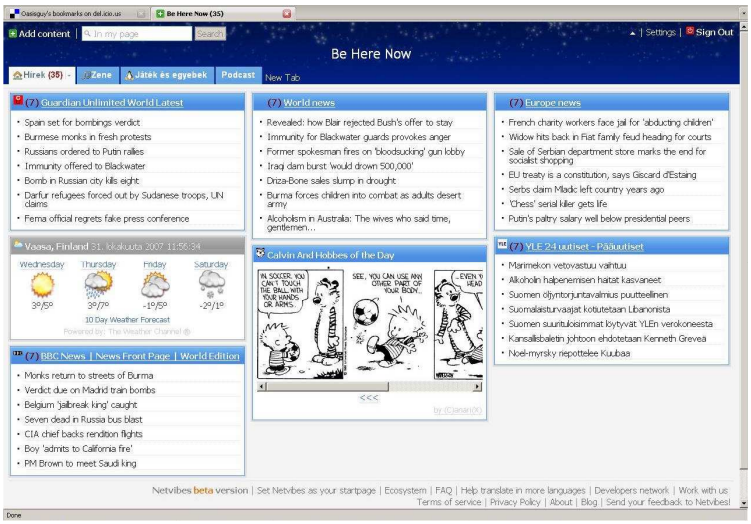

Figure 5: Netvibes personalized starting page

Figure 5 shows an example of a personalized starting page, run by the service provider Netvibes, and collecting RSS feeds from *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *BBC, YLE*, an additional application displaying a cartoon strip, and another one producing an instant weather report. Such is a very convenient way of organizing information – one that at least creates the illusion what we are not lost in the sea of information online. When clicked on a news item, it can be read in its entirety *within* the personalized page itself, and it is also possible to get directly transferred to the website in question.

5.3.2 The content

The RSS technology can be used by any website that is not entirely static. Naturally, the use of RSS is more important for sites that produce quickly perishable information, such as news sites or blogs that deal in actualities.

As for the kinds of information that can be published on personalized starting pages, it is hard to provide an extensive list. Apart from conventional RSS feeds, an armada of "widgets" or "mini-applications" are available: these can, for example, display the weather forecast or continuously updated photo galleries, show famous quotes or stock exchange indicators, play embedded videos, or entertain the user with crosswords, puzzles or some other mini-games.

5.3.3 The business model

Admittedly, there is little public information on the business models behind personalized starting pages. "The Netvibes business model is largely undisclosed, although clearly investors are satisfied that the company is more than cool technology"

(Maven 2007). In most cases, this business model differs from the popular advertising-powered model of the net: even Google's personalized home page service iGoogle (http://www.igoogle.com) does not feature ads[35]. Direct advertising cannot be found either on Bloglines (http://www.bloglines.com), Microsoft's Live.com (http://www.live.com) or on Netvibes (http://www.netvibes.com) – in fact, Netvibes explicitly states on its homepage that it features "no ads, no logos, no corporate control" (2007). Instead, since these sites act as gateways to other contents, it is supposed that behind their operation stand affiliate programs: i.e. content providers share their revenues with the referring sites (Maven 2007). Content provision does not necessarily mean links through RSS: companies might also provide various applications (such as the price-comparison product finder of *Kelkoo.com*) that users can integrate into their homepage (Netvibes 2007a).

5.3.4 RSS and the media institution

RSS – and similar syndication methods such as Atom – and personalized starting pages are not business services in themselves; they are merely pieces of technology. Through their use, readers can pick and mix contents from all over the web, but these technologies do not belong to anyone: nobody profits *directly* from other people using them. The copyright of the RSS specification is owned by Harvard University, who published it in Creative Commons license, meaning that it is free for everyone to use, copy, distribute, transmit or adapt it, as long as credit is given to the licensor, and the modified version is published under the same copyright license as the original (Harvard 2003). That is to say, a website – say, an online outlet of a traditional newspaper – might decide to develop its own, improved, private version of RSS, but if it takes the RSS specification as a starting point, then this "new RSS" must be made public too. If it is a new specification from scratch, then it won't be compatible with existing RSS readers, and therefore it will have to build up its user base from scratch, too.

So the best an existing site can do is to subscribe to the publicly available model of RSS – meaning that it would have to compete with everyone else who uses the same

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[35] …even though Google is an important publisher of contextual classified advertising (Economist 2007a). In the second quarter of 2007 alone, it produced $3.87 bn revenues, chiefly stemming from advertising (Google 2007b).

technology. The domination of this technology is, thanks to the publicity of the technology, impossible.

5.3.5 Summary

The syndication of news items and the collection of these syndicated news items onto personalized "news-aggregator pages" enables online contents to reach their consumers quickly, and they offer considerable freedom and convenience in filtering the contents available online. Since the technology of RSS (and, similarly, that of Atom[36]) is freely and publicly available, their publicness opposes their domination by a minority interest group that would prefer excluding other sources from reaching audiences.

All the above, however, does not mean that these two technologies in question would contribute *directly* to reasoned debate or to the development of the political or cultural public sphere. They are merely tools for organizing and spreading (quickly) information that is available online.

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[36] Atom is a standard published by the Internet Engineering Task Force (http://www.ietf.org), a non-profit industry organization (IETF 2007).

5.4 Discussion forums

5.4.1 The concept

Internet discussion forums are a basic form of debate and opinion exchange. Forums are sometimes referred to as message boards – as if they were real life boards onto which messages are attached, one under the other, organized into different topics and, within the topics, various threads. Using the graphical interface of the World Wide Web, users can attach pictures or other files to their posts, and naturally they can establish hypertext links between the posts and other homepages.

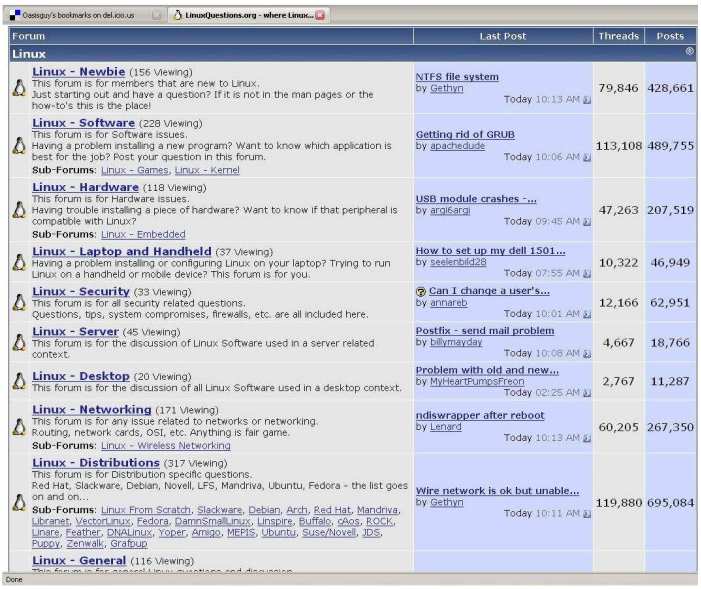

Figure 6: Topics and threads in a forum

There is no single generic model of forums on the internet. However, the following "ideal type" of forums illustrates well the concept and the operation of such a website, even though actual instances of such message boards might differ from it to a certain extent.

Users of the forum can participate in the discussion upon registration, which is free of charge (considering an often-used business model of the forums (see chapter 5.4.3), it is in the owner's interest to generate as much traffic to the site as possible – hence the free registration and participation). Upon registration, users choose a user name and provide the board's administrators with an e-mail address, through which they can be contacted by other users or the staff of the forum (e.g. in case of a technical problem).

Although in the discussion everyone is equal in principle, in practice, this is not always so. Naturally, the existence of the forum requires that there are administrators who take care of the website's maintenance. Users with special rights to edit or remove posts, and

to carry out sanctions against other members, are called moderators – their task is to keep the conversation within the boundaries set by the owners of the forum. Sanctions include verbal warnings and the temporary, or, in worst case, permanent, ban of users. Administrators might restrict the rights of (certain groups of) users, too. For example, they can allow or disallow the creation of new topics, the editing of certain already existing threads etc.

Still, in general, there is a balance between "those who produce and those who consume ideas." Every spectator is a potential participant. Similarly, the opportunity of quick and public reply is also secured for all participants. In line with the arguments of C. W. Mills, these features suggest that **forums contribute to people forming a "community of publics" rather than an aimless "mass"** (Eldridge 1983: 82).

Next to the entries on a message board, you can see the nickname – user name – of the submitter, and some other pieces of information, such as their location, e-mail or website address, number of posts on the board and a stamp-sized picture, known as avatar, supposedly representing the user.

Figure 7: Entries in a forum

It is also customary at forums to rank users in function of their activity – however, this usually means the mere evaluation of quantity but not quality (i.e. more posts equal higher ranks). "Post count" and rank are supposedly signs of internal authority on the forum (as opposed to the external authority – authority a forum participant has in real life), but this internal authority is often obviously questionable (e.g. with topics such as "Pump up your post count here" or "What are you listening to right now?").

The question of authority is tied to the basic idea and *raison d'être* of forums: to provide space for discussion. This discussion, naturally, is hardly ever for itself, but what its

"real end" is depends on the contents of the forum.
More often than not, posts on a forum are archived into a searchable database. In addition, items already posted might not be edited even by their original author, which suggests that **forums, just as comments on a blog or on a social news site, promote conscious, careful conversation** – you have to phrase your argument in such a way that it could be defended in subsequent debate. On forums, the sentence "everything you said could be used against you" is absolutely true.

5.4.2 The content

Creating a new forum or starting a new topic in an existing one is very easy, and so it is not surprising that there is hardly any area of "life, universe and everything" that is not discussed on internet forums.
One could distinguish between two broad types of forums: certain boards such as that of Hungarian online news portal *Index.hu*, or the Japanese *2-Channel* are what I would call "loose" forums, which accommodate a broad range of sub-forums, each dealing with a specific topic – from cat names through politics and gardening. In contrast, other forums only deal with a more or less narrowly defined topic – such as the fan discussion board of a band or the forum of, say, deer hunting enthusiasts.
The use and purpose of a forum, as stated above, is closely related to its topic. But in general, the following categories might be established: forums might **spread news and information** (in which case the discussion is, in itself, inconsequential), they might **provide help, advice or troubleshooting** for their users (in which case the discussion is indeed consequential, but not necessarily contributive to a public sphere in a Habermasian sense), they might act as a **virtual playground or sandbox** (e.g. "Solve the riddle and post a new one!"), or, most importantly, their purpose might be **the exchange and debate of opinion**.

In this latter case, the exchange of opinions is still inconsequential insofar as there are no inherent, built-in mechanisms in a forum that would lead to a change in the "established state of things" only because a debate took place and resulted in a certain outcome. As I noted earlier, I located the importance of social news sites in the fact that reasoned argumentation there does have a consequence – it decides what gets on the

front page of the site and therefore which issues gain wider recognition. But forums do not have front pages, and this mere technical detail means that even the most interesting conversation can get buried under other topics quickly and easily.

As Mills established, for a group of people to act as a public as opposed to a mass, it is important that their crystallized "common opinion" could be mobilized into action (Eldridge 1983: 82). Such a mobilization does not occur on internet forums – but neither does this necessarily occur in the case of a conversation taking place in a coffee house, among real life actors. ("Talk is cheap," we could say, but talk is just as cheap when it happens in real life.) In my view, the reason why internet forums fail to channel opinion into action lies in the fact that they do not encourage reasoned argumentation (this, in turn stems from their inconsequential nature). It might be considerably easier to leave a forum or even to found a new one altogether than to bother with arguing against others (see Galston 2002: 55–56).

5.4.3 The business model

From the point of view of the technology, it is very easy to set up and run a forum; the only requirements being some storage space on a web server and a freely available "forum engine" – a piece of software that manages, stores and displays the entries in the form that is conventional among forums. Often these two are offered for free by forum providers such as AceBoard (http://www.aceboard.net). (As described in chapter 4, "free" from the point of view of the user might mean "funded by advertising" from the point of the provider.)

In other words, the barriers to entry are very low. Precisely because of these low barriers to entry, there is very limited business potential in running the forum itself. Once members are required to pay for their membership, they can easily migrate to other, free sites (unless there is some kind of added value to the forum, such as the contribution of a well respected, important personality or celebrity). However, there might be a rationale in charging members for the access of the archives of the forum, as shown by the example of *2-Channel* (Furukawa 2003).

Considering the business model applied, we can also distinguish between discussion forums that were created for their own sake, and forums that are part of a business

organization with a higher agenda. A fan-created discussion group of an actor might be an example for the former, while the discussion board on a company website, where customers can get advice or leave feedback, is an example for the latter use of forums.
In the first case, the model fits into the general pattern of online advertising (creating audiences with a free service, and exposing these audiences to advertising), although it does not necessarily follow that such forums are profit oriented. In the second case, the organization behind the forum foots its costs, but here, even if the forum greatly enhances "customer experience," or at least provides some help to clients, it hardly ever could act as a *direct* contributor to revenues.

5.4.4 On the identity of users and the reliability of forums

The issue of reliability or credibility of forums could, and in my view, should, be addressed from different points of view, pertaining to various purposes of forums. What I mean by this is the following.
When forums are considered as media (although not part of the official media institution, as I will show shortly), or as transmitters of news and information, their reliability is very important. And, given the opportunity of anonymous participation, it is highly questionable, too, especially when it comes to such pieces of information that do not appear in traditional media and therefore could hardly be cross-checked with other sources. (Paradoxically, it is often precisely the anonymity of participants that enables important pieces of "sensitive" information to emerge.)
But online forums are most important for the public sphere because they provide a place for discussion. And judged from this approach, the question of reliability turns out to be of secondary importance.

Unless registration on a forum is tied to some kind of sensitive, private information, such as one's bank account number or real-life address, participants in an online discussion might feel reasonably safe in the knowledge that their real identities could be kept separate from their online user names.
The use of screen names is a large step towards establishing a disregard for external authority, and thus, towards an equal discussion among the participants and a larger freedom of speech. Further, if the forum requires its participants to use user names or

nicknames, then these virtual identities will automatically gather some kind of a history behind them, and from the archives of the forum this history can be retrieved. This, as noted in 5.4.1, is supposed to contribute to the quality of discussion. On the other hand, the use of pseudonyms also means a step towards information with inherently questionable credibility.

Finally, if posting is anonymous and doesn't require any kind of registration, this has the double consequence of allowing totally free speech and total disregard for external authority, at the expense of further loss of (both "external" and "internal") credibility[37]. And in fact this might just present the ideal situation for a public sphere to manifest in. This is the argument of Hiroyuki Nishimura, founder of *2-Channel*.

> Delivering news without taking any risk is very important to us. There is a lot of information disclosure or secret news gathered on Channel 2. Few people would post that kind of information by taking a risk. [In addition,] people can only truly discuss something when they don't know each other. […] Under a perfectly anonymous system […] all information is treated equally; only an accurate argument will work." (Quoted in Furukawa 2003.)

This is why the world's biggest discussion forum, the Japanese *2-Channel* is almost entirely anonymous (users do have the option to log in and use a nickname of their choosing, but the 'default setting' is namelessness); this is a contrast to "Western" style forums whereby the use of user names is most often than not required (and members are usually willing to share not only their user names but bits of other information about themselves as well). (Katayama 2007.)

In what seems to highlight an important cultural difference between Japan and "the West," the anonymous nature of *2-Channel* was linked to the formality, repression and importance of honor ("face") in Japanese culture. "On any given day you can read [anonymous] messages about users' schemes to assault their bosses, murder their teachers or blow up a neighborhood kindergarten" (Furukawa 2003), which shows that *2-Channel* can function because it provides the freedom of expression that is missing from, or repressed in, real life, bound by formalities, tradition, and deeply rooted, unwritten laws. (Katayama 2007.)

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[37] By external credibility I mean credibility established via the real-life identity of the submitter of a post, whereas internal credibility refers to the credibility that is attached to a user name on a forum because of its perceived previous activity.

The founder of the site himself cites another reason:

> I think [the popularity of 2-Channel] is related to the Japanese sense of homogeneity and our mentality of all being in the middle class. For instance, in the United States, people wouldn't argue with someone they don't know. Japanese don't feel awkward even if they don't know others' status or background. (Quoted in Furukawa 2003.)

The structure of *2-Channel* is loose in every respect. There are no boundaries on the topics, and there are no appointed, official moderators – instead, a handful of volunteers try to have participants respect the lax rules of the message board. The optional, but often preferred, anonymity, might promote reasoned argumentation insofar as "all information is treated equally," but it also leads to a lot of hate speech, propaganda, and in general, the publication of posts that cannot be judged informative or constructive from any point of view. The founder of the board has faced more than 50 lawsuits so far, for defamation, copyright and privacy violations and for causing "personal injuries." (Katayama 2007.)

And yet this tolerated anarchy seems to be working. If *2-Channel* is a soapbox from where everybody can shout their woes and frustration into the world, political parties, companies and civil organizations are listening to it.

> [W]ith 2.5 million posts a day and about 800 active boards split into thousands of threads, […] this single site has more influence on Japanese popular opinion than the prime minister, the emperor and the traditional media combined. (Katayama 2007.)[38]

Katayama's article (2007) enumerates a couple of stories that are meant to illustrate the power of the "mob" of *2-Channel* – these include a case where users of the forum responded to the call for help of a disaster-struck area, and another where they, by acting in unison, managed to have a possibly dangerous advertising billboard removed from a busy shopping street in Tokyo. According to the founder of the site, *2-Channel* often "corrects the mistakes" of the conventional media by publicizing stories that at first went unnoticed by this latter, with many of these stories eventually making it into the mainstream media through *2-Channel* (Furukawa 2003).

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[38] *2-Channel* is the 281st most visited website, according to web analyst Alexa (2007d). Its daily share of global internet traffic varies between 0.2 – 0.3%.

Could *2-Channel* be the example of a Habermasian public sphere, where opinions are detached from their anonymous bearers? This is the ultimate abolishment of any regard for external authority: as far as it is possible, it is not people, but solely arguments that confront one another. This kind of freedom might prove stimulating, because not only is it possible in such an environment to argue for every possible view without the least restriction, it is also possible to argue for fabricated, fake views, as in a thought experiment. In such an environment, everything can be disputed or questioned, the most fundamental tenets of a given ideology as well as the most superficial, insignificant details of our lives. In addition, when considering the Madisonian view on democracy, there is reason for optimism: without even knowing the names of other participants, it is extremely hard, if not impossible, to cooperate, to form factions.

However, this kind of a public sphere has its own problems too: attached to the unbounded freedom of speech comes a set of problems that makes reasoned argument – *discussion* instead of parallel monologues – difficult. Most notably, if utterances cannot even be matched with a virtual identity, it is easier to simply leave a conversation or disrupt it in some way (e.g. abusing others) than to offer a reasoned argument in the defence of one's view. In such a setting, it is also possible to manipulate the flow of the conversation, e.g. by posting messages in favor of one's own view in the name of others, or posting badly constructed counter arguments and then crushing them, thereby making one's real view appear more convincing.
A deeper analysis of *2-Channel*, taking into consideration its cultural background and implications, could help evaluate the possible benefits of such an anonymous forum. Due to the lack of my Japanese language skills, I cannot even attempt to undertake this task.

In summary, the following can be established. Forums apply **different regulations for the use of screen names**, from requiring registration with a real-life name to allowing completely anonymous participation in the discussion. **The inherent credibility of forums varies accordingly**: as a rule of thumb, the more information users provide about themselves on a forum, the higher the general reliability of information. On the other hand, **distancing oneself from their real-life identities, via the use of screen**

names or remaining unnamed, enables an increased freedom of speech and an increased disregard from external authority.

It also should be kept in mind that the issue of credibility is more important for forums that act as disseminators of information than for forums whose main goal is the discussion of personal opinion.

5.4.5 Are forums part of the media institution?

Naturally, traditional media enterprises can just as well use discussion forums as anyone else – the question is rather whether traditional media holds a monopoly over them, or can these forums, by acting as advocacy media, influence the media institution's operation.

The answer to the first part of the question is a definite "no," since the technology of setting up and running a forum is freely available. The business model of forums differs from the traditional setting of a small number of news producers and a large number of consumers – their very point is that consumers are transformed into participants.

Whether or not forums can act as important advocacy media is tied in part to their popularity and "visibility." It is not by accident that Dahlgren's original concept of the advocacy media demands that space is provided for alternative media *by* the traditional media. Having a time slot on a national TV channel in itself loans a certain weight and importance to a programme that, for example, deals with issues of minorities. Visibility means making a narrow sphere "public" in the broad sense of the word; it refers to bringing attention to issues.

As I have noted several times, visibility thus understood is a key problem of the internet, stemming from the fact that virtual space is a practically unlimited resource. In other words, there is a natural tendency towards the multiplication of websites, and thus the fragmentation of audiences. For a discussion board to become part of an advocacy media, it is necessary to overcome this inherent tendency towards fragmentation, and to create an audience of considerable size.

This is exemplified by *2-Channel*, and its uncommon match between a "goodness of fit" (provided by the confines of the language) and cultural factors that together result in a message board of both great popularity, and, in the specific local setting, influential

advocacy media[39].

But in general, forums are more suitable for creating fragmented issue publics than a coherent advocacy media. Partly because, as said before, they are very easy to create and multiply, and partly because, just like in the case of blogs and social news sites (or for that matter, face-to-face conversation), there is a limited number of participants that could effectively converse on the same message board.

5.4.6 Globality and goodness of fit

As I have described in chapter 3.3, the "globality" of public spheres can be interpreted in a number of different ways.

For a start, forums hold the potential of a global discussion the the sense that they are, just like any other site, accessible from all over the world. The number of potential users is limited, on the other hand, by the language(s) used on the forum and the topics it deals with – these two factors, in combination with the visibility (see above) of a particular message board, can establish a perceived "goodness of fit" between the scope of discussion taking place on the forum and the real-life institutions that this discussion is aiming to influence.

However, such a goodness of fit is unlikely to be established on a global scale, given the lack of powerful global institutions. On the other hand, discussion forums are also apt for creating *issue publics*. These issue publics can become global in the sense that the problem they are focusing on might present itself globally, and in order to address this problem either it is not necessary to turn to institutions, or solutions involve addressing local institutions ("think global, act local").

In addition, examining the role of forums from the point of view of the theory of Keohane and Nye, forums, again, have a *potential* to establish a global public sphere, questioning, trying and testing the credibility of participants in this imagined global political public sphere. What hinders this potential to become actualized is the questionable credibility of forums itself; as discussed in chapter 5.4.4.

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[39] "There have been quite a few stories tha the mass media picked up (from *2-Channel*) that became big stories. At the same time, *2-Channel* has a role as an ombudsman, investigating mass media's reports" (*2-Channel* creator Nishimura, quoted by Furukawa 2003).

5.4.7 Mode of consumption

When referring to discussion forums, consumption could mean both reading and contributing (posting). Communication on discussion boards employs not only textual but also graphic elements, such as the avatar ("self-portrait") of the participants, attached pictures or even video clips, animations.

Although apparent in all forms of online communication, it is here, in connection with the message boards that I mention smileys and emoticons – two sets of signs that have the purpose of enriching written, textual communication by representing the emotions of the writer of the text.

Smileys in online communication are groups of characters representing a face – as in :), the colon being the eyes and the closing bracket a smiling mouth, when the group of characters is looked at sideways. Other variations include the sad :(, the winking ;) and the laughing :-D. At least this is the case in Western style written communication. In the Asian group of smileys, variations of the sign ^_^ are used to represent faces, the difference between the groups of smileys illustrating how various cultures affect people's perception of emotions[40]. Smileys using conventional textual characters and punctuation marks are often replaced by small, sometimes animated icons or "emoticons." (McCarthy 2007, Wenner 2007.)

Online communication has also developed its own sets of "online dialects," often characterized by the heavy use of abbreviations and/or a creative use of spelling rules. The following are but a handful of examples that one can come across on any online message board: LOL (laughing out loud), ROTFL (rolling on the floor, laughing), AFAIK (as far as I know), IMHO (in my humble opinion), pwnage ("ownage," used as an expression of appreciation and respect), or the " > " sign, as in "Conan O'Brien > life," meaning "Conan O'Brien is bigger, better, funnier than life itself." Among computer game enthusiast the use of "leetspeak," or the substitution of alphabetic

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[40] According to a study by behavioural scientist Masaki Yuki, Japanese tend to look at the eyes for emotional cues, as opposed to Americans for whom the key indicator of emotion is the mouth. (Yuki et al. 2007, cited by Wenner 2007).

characters with numerical ones[41] is also a popular practice.

In short, online written communication operates with a unique set of communicative tools at its disposal. Naturally, it lacks vocal means of expression and bodily cues of metacommunication such as tone, pronunciation, volume of speech, hand gestures and body language in general, and it is different from hand-written communication as well (in that, obviously, it is not hand-written). On the other hand, it provides communicators with various other means to illustrate, stress, alter or expand the meaning of the pure written text: these include pictures, animations, smileys, the use of colours, etc. Just as in face-to-face communication, whether or not someone can effectively participate in a discussion depends on whether they understand these communicative devices.

It would require a more extensive textual analysis to find out if online written communication is in any way more restrictive – or on the contrary, more enabling – than face-to-face, spoken communication. (It is to be noted, however, that the hypertextuality of the internet – the faculty of linking related websites to one another via hyperlinks – provides an ease of information retrieval that is missing from print texts. This is hypothesized to be especially useful in a supposedly reasoned argumentation, as pieces of information supporting a claim can be easily made available and "seamlessly inserted" into the argument itself.)

As I have noted in the introduction to chapter 5, forums are particularly interesting (along with blogs and social news sites) from a communicative point of view because they represent a communicative form between mass and interpersonal communication – and as I have noted under chapter 5.1.4, forum entries are often unedited: even if there are moderators who might censor the individual entries, the practice of such censorship does not affect the contents and quality of an entry in such a way as the work of an editorial staff affects a draft article.

Finally, I shall mention two further, minor points in connection with the "consumption" of forums. First, I reiterate the point that the archives and the searchable nature of

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[41] For example, this sentence in leetspeak could look like this: f0r 3x4mpl3, thi5 53nt3nc3 in 1337-5p34k c0u1d 100k 1ik3 thi5.

forums is expected to improve the natural quality of discussion, because, if users are required to use at least a virtual identity in their posting, previous utterances can be checked and faults or inconsistencies in an argument can be pointed out – or, more bluntly, whatever you say can (and will) be used against you in subsequent debate.
Second, it is worth noting how forums can cooperate with e-mail or RSS feeds: it is customary to provide participants with the option of sending notifications to them if someone else has replied either to a topic in general or to a specific post in particular. This helps the debate going on even without the participants having to constantly monitor all the forums and all the discussions they are engaged in.

5.4.8 Forums and the culture industry

Thanks to their ease of use (and ease of creation) and hence their proliferation, in combination with their accessibility and hypertextual nature which makes cross-referencing easy, forums do increase the availability of cultural products and promote cultural diversity (this is especially true in connection with – popular – music and movies). Hand in hand with this former phenomenon, forums also promote layman criticism or the relativization of cultural – aesthetic standards. In fact, much that has been written about the cultural ("Cultural") importance of blogs apply to forums as well (see chapter 5.1.9).
However, the example of *2-Channel* prompts me to revisit Adorno's idea of autonomous art and the role of the culture industry.
"The development of modern news journalism, with its non-decorative and formulaic discourse, was seen [by Frankfurt School scholars] as the degradation of language which deprived it of faculties capable of giving expression to personal experience," writes Malmberg (2006: 7) about the reasons for Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse rejecting the idea of communicative freedom. But do not, after all, forums change this, by reintroducing a highly informal and decorative discourse? After all, forums mix the elements of interpersonal and mass communication, often matching the informality tied to the former with the visibility tied to the latter[42] (instead of imposing the formality of public communication). Thanks to the use of nicknames, or, as the example of *2-*

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[42] See also chapter 3.4.2.

Channel shows, total anonymity, a hitherto unknown degree of freedom of speech is established – but does it mean that this communicative freedom could have a similar role to that of authoritative art? Could it also act as "an avenue through which [individual] freedom could speak?"

In my understanding – although of course I cannot hypothesize about what Adorno would say –. the answer is in the question. If the communicative freedom of forums can only be taken advantage of through the use of fake names or through avoiding using names altogether, then it cannot be real freedom. Real freedom would imply that there would be no need to hide or disguise one's real identity.

5.4.9 Forums as communities?

Discussion forums have not evolved spectacularly since Galston (2002) analyzed their role in the establishment of online communities, and I agree with him that although it is not impossible for a textbook-definition *community* to form among participants of an online message board, this is only likely to happen in case the members of the forum are already connected through real-life communities – see chapter 3.4.3.

5.4.10 Summary

Online message boards are a popular form of discussion, dealing with a wide range of topics. Often organized into an archived and searchable database, they serve as points of "secondary information procession," news dissemination, opinion formation or as providers of help and advice.

Given the low costs and the ease involved in creating or running such a forum, they can only be part of the established, traditional media institution insofar as the media can use them just as well as any other institution or group of people. On the other hand, there are examples (such as that of Japanese *2-Channel*) that illustrate that forums in certain circumstances can act as effective advocacy media, reflecting upon and "correcting" traditional media output.

Forums, just as other internet sites, are global in principle and as for their access, but their globality is unlikely to be actualized on the global scale in the same ways as it is manifest locally – because of the lack of global institutions. On the other hand, forums can create global issue publics (in the loose or narrow interpretation of "public sphere"),

and they also take part in the credibility-based concept of globality created by Keohane and Nye – however, from this aspect it is especially important that forums themselves have to tackle the issue of questionable credibility of their members.
Credibility, when looking at forums as points of information dissemination, is often inversely related to members' freedom of speech. If members of the forum can be identified (and thus credibility is reinforced), then the freedom of speech is often curtailed and there is less chance that participants' external rank and authority is disregarded in the discussion. If members use pseudonyms, then freedom of speech can be enhanced and there is a way – although an uncertain one – to build up communicative, reasoned authority within the message board itself. If the forum is entirely anonymous and posting is entirely noncommittal, then the freedom of speech is maximized, but credibility is at its lowest (cf. how Thompson (2002) addresses this problem, taking uncertainty as the premise for online communication, chapter 2.5.2).

Credibility is of secondary importance from the aspect of opinion exchange on forums (unless of course opinions are backed up by facts that cannot be easily checked from other sources). In fact, a total detachment of arguments from their bearers might help the case of a Habermasian public sphere where the role of external rank, authority, or any other factor not stemming directly from the argument itself is eliminated. But in such a setting, conducting or merely following the debate itself is expected to be difficult, because of the unstructured, loose nature of the discussion.

Overall, the role of "forums, as such" in the re-democratization of the public sphere is at best ambivalent. Most of their impact and use is contingent upon the behaviour of their members, but there is one particular factor inherent in the concept of forums that opposes deliberative, democratic discussion, and this is the ease with which new forums can be launched. It is easier to leave a board than to respond to criticism with reasoned counterarguments (with the words of Galston, "exit" is favoured over "voice" (2002)). This results in the creation of a large number of small "issue publics."
Admittedly, merely through their global availability and access they do promote *discussion*, but they have no inherent mechanisms that would incite members to make this discussion *reasoned, deliberative debate* as opposed to casual chit-chat or

emotional, personal bickering.

However, even if forums might not revolutionalize deliberation, they might gain an important role in the public sphere as representatives of an advocacy media and as points of information dissemination.

6 Conclusion

In this paper I have analyzed certain services of the internet, notably blogs, social bookmarking and news sites, RSS, personalized homepages and online discussion forums, in order to understand whether or not they contribute to the democratization of the public sphere, by helping substantial democracy and the discursive construction of democratic "soft" power. Such a contribution might involve the establishment of some kind of advocacy media – setting the agenda and framing the issues the public sphere is concerned with – as well as the establishment of "virtual coffee houses," i.e. virtual meeting points where citizens can exchange their thoughts in reasoned debate.
I first present a summary of my findings and an overview of the conclusions I have drawn from them.

6.1 Infrastructural limitations and business interests

First of all, the internet is today, globally speaking, a scarce resource – in other words, although it has become part of citizens' everyday life in certain parts of the world, its distribution among (and possibly even *within*) nation states is highly unequal, as its access is tied to certain infrastructural requirements. However, internet penetration rates have been growing ever since the physical establishment of the network, and there is also an obvious trend of developing and more easily available IT devices (computers).

Second, part of the democratizing potential of the internet stems from the fact that a large array of its services, and especially services which provide space for online discussion, are free (from the point of view of the customer, the only costs involved are the costs of connection). This freedom is tied to business interests of providers of advertising space. Given the fragmentation of the internet (a natural corollary of space as a practically infinite resource), it is harder to establish a monopoly on the online advertising market than in the traditional media (this is certainly beneficial from the point of view of a democratic public sphere), but popular web services that collect data from internet users might attain and potentially abuse a monopolistic position. (Google, the owner of the world's most popular search engine (Alexa 2007c), and one of the most important advertising space providers, has been accused of such charges.)

6.2 Blogs, social news sites, forums

The term "blog" originally referred to a certain form of publishing information on the internet – however, it is often used in a restrictive sense, referring to personal websites that try to give a new form to "citizen journalism." Since blogs are easy and cheap to create, they do democratize the ability to have a "public(ly available) voice," but it would be a mistake to expect them to guarantee that these voices will be heard, too – for a start, traditional media organizations might use blogs just as well as aspiring civil journalists. The democratizing potential of blogs is limited by the fragmentation of the "blogosphere" (stemming precisely from their availability).

From the analysis of in- and outgoing links on websites, it can be established that certain blogs, acting as a core of the blogosphere, are highly influential (often referenced – but referencing, once again, does not mean agreement with the views published on a particular blog). However, these influential and highly valued blogs might just as well be part of the organized, institutional, mainstream media (as the example of *Engadget* and *The Huffington Post* illustrates).

Given their limited resources, independent blogs are more important as disseminators, collectors and commentators of news, than as first-hand suppliers of news. They might still be capable of contributing to providing an alternative framework to the one supplied by *mainstream* media, by using multiple alternative sources, but their fragmentation and the inconsequential nature of the information published on blogs hinders the actualization of this potential.

Thanks to the technologies utilized by online information publishing, blogs act as an extremely fast channel of news. (Naturally, these technologies can be used by online versions of traditional, offline publications too.)

Given the non-consequential nature of discussions developed in the comments area of a blog, or between blogs, their ability to construct a space for discursive deliberation is limited.

Social bookmarking sites *indirectly* help discussion taking place in the public sphere, by providing an alternative way to find useful and valuable information on the internet. But such sites' direct, discursive relevance to the public sphere was found to be meagre.

Social news sites, on the other hand, provide a promising opportunity for the establishment of advocacy media, and thus for the discursive control, creation and curbing of power. This is possible because such sites actively help, promote and reward reasoned debate to take place, via the system that is characterized by a "front page" and "meritocratic" comments area. But social news sites can only take full advantage of their potential if their "population" remains in an optimal range: such a site needs to be popular enough to be meaningful, but it also needs to keep discussion manageable and to prevent its contents from being overly fragmented. (Further research is advocated to find out where exactly this optimal range of members stretches.) Social news sites, according to the analysis of the Project for Excellence in Journalism scheme (PEJ 2007), are dependent on traditional media outlets for "raw material" (articles, original reports). In this sense, they are still "parasitic" in nature (cf. Habermas (2006)), but they tend to utilize a large variety of sources, to focus on different issues and in general to provide an alternative agenda and an alternative framing of current topics, compared to traditional, institutionalized, mainstream media.

RSS and personalized home pages were briefly covered in this paper, because they are very important in speeding up, simplifying and controlling the consumption of online news and information. This also means that indirectly these technologies might contribute to discussion that is taking place online.

Online message boards or forums were designed to facilitate online discussion – and yet their role in the establishment of a deliberative public sphere is ambivalent.
The category of "discussion forums" as such is too large for detailed analysis, because forums can differ from one another greatly, e.g. as regards their policy on the identification of members, the number of members, their topic(s) or their purpose. In general, however, the following can be established.
Forums encourage the discussion of their members – this being their *raison d'être* –, but they do not have inherent features that would promote *reasoned argumentation*. In contrast, the inconsequential nature of arguing on a forum contributes to the creation of fragmented discussion groups where members largely share similar views (i.e. it might be easier to leave a discussion than to stay and argue).

In general, the credibility or reliability of information posted on forums is questionable to a greater extent than e.g. information published in face-to-face meeting or published in the media, because utterances on a forum are often tied to fictious identities (if they are tied to any identity at all), and there is no such filtering mechanism involved in the posting of an entry to a forum as, for example, the editorial staff of an established media organ. However, often information "value" is bought at the expense of credibility: the publication of sensitive, important pieces of information is helped if the person publishing it does not have to worry about being held accountable.

In the secondary procession – dissemination, evaluation – of news the aspect of credibility is less important. In addition, the uncertainty that is attached to virtual identities (or the fact that virtual identities or roles can hardly be connected with real-life identities) also means that external authority is disregarded on discussion forums. Hence (anonymous) forums present a setting in which arguments can be detached from their bearers, and thus reasoned debate can take a "pure" form. However, such a setting also poses practical problems as to how to conduct the debate so as to avoid it becoming an irreflexive set of parallel monologues.

In summary, the impact of discussion forums on the deliberative public sphere is ambiguous. Certain forums can become its constructive part, either by acting as advocacy media and thus modifying, altering the agenda set by the mainstream media and directing attention to pressing issues (shown by the example of Japanese *2-Channel)*, or, naturally, by serving as a place of discussion for a community the members of which strive for rational debate even if this activity is not immediately rewarded by the forum itself. Certain forums might contribute to the establishment of global issue publics; and certain forums might only work towards the creation of extremely fragmented opinion groups.

6.3 Is a global public sphere possible?

The internet is a global network of computer network, and as such it is capable of providing a platform for global discussions to take place. Whether this can mean the establishment of a public sphere depends on how we understand this latter concept.

Following the institutionalist view that uses Habermas' original theory of *The Structural Transformation...* as a starting point, a global public sphere cannot exist, because there

are no global institutions it could affect. The concept of "political public sphere" makes sense in a national framework[43]. Certain theories hypothesize that this might change in the future: e.g. through revising rules of a procedural democracy and extending these rules to supranational organizations such as the European Union (Bohman 2004), or through globalization (powered by international capitalism) resulting in the erosion of national institutions (Lash 2002). But today's reality is that there are no such powerful supranational institutions that could be addressed by a global citizenry.

However, the public sphere can also be seen as built around groups of people interested in particular problems: issue publics. The analysis of blogs, social bookmarking and news sites and discussion forums shows that the internet helps the formation and cooperation of such issue publics on a global scale. The conversation among members of these issue publics can be understood as constituting a "public spheres" in a narrow sense of the expression, where deliberation does not concern the common interests of society as such, but the interests of narrowly defined (identity-)groups (see also: Fraser 1992, Garnham 1992). A public consisting of such issue publics is necessarily a fragmented one, but even Habermas himself admits that if there is connection or overlap between these issue publics (e.g. people belong to several such publics at the same time), then this may "even serve to counter trends of fragmentation" (2006: 25). Advocates of online communication are eager to point out that one of the greatest advantages of the internet is that its technologies (e.g. its hypertextual nature) allow and promote such connections between issue publics on a hitherto unknown scale.

On the other hand, my analysis showed that both blogs and discussion forums rather promote the creation of groups where members tend to agree on the issue they are concerned about, as opposed to the creation of *discursive publics* where members of the group represent different opinions and are willing to conduct reasoned argument about them. Social news sites do promote and reward reasoned argumentation and the formation of more heterogeneous publics[44], but they, just like blogs and discussion

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[43] This view is also apparent from Habermas' assessment of the public sphere and the internet (Habermas 2006).

[44] User-compiled knowledge databases, such as Wikipedia, are similar in this regard to social news sites. Contribution to such a site is *consequential*, given the objective of the site. This fact, especially when combined with general popularity of the site in question, advocates reasoned debate as opposed to creating a new database altogether. (See chapter 7.)

forums, can only accommodate the conversation of a limited number of users.

Finally, in the understanding of Keohane and Nye (2002), there is a global communicational public sphere, which affects the legitimacy and practice of power indirectly, through the reinforcement or weakening of participants' *credibility*. My analysis of blogs, forums and social news sites found that all of these services can play a part in influencing the perceived credibility of public figures (as well as of any other individual), but only to a very limited extent, ironically, because of the inherent uncertainty of credibility of these services.

6.4 Intercultural public sphere(s)

Assessing the possibility of a global public sphere prompts the question: can the internet in general and blogs, social news sites and discussion forums in particular aid intercultural communication?

The analysis of the three said services of the internet suggest an affirmative answer. Not because online, virtual spaces would not be bounded by the particular culture they were formed in (or formed *by*), but because they provide an open, accessible channel of communication[45]: because users can take up virtual identities, it becomes extremely hard to exclude someone from the discussion for reasons tied to their real-life identities (e.g. their nationality, skin colour, religion, gender, age, wealth or political views). Because participants of an online discussion can choose which features of their identities to show to others, the impact of prejudices can be curbed.

However, deeper analysis would be required to gain an insight into how exactly online communication affects intercultural dialogue. I formulate a handful of reservations concerning this future study in chapter 7.

6.5 Impact on the culture industry

As I have noted in chapter 3.5, I cannot in this paper follow the aesthetic-philosophical approach of Horkheimer and Adorno. Instead of trying to reconcile the views of the original theory of the culture industry with subsequent theories of the culture industr*ies,* I focused on two practical aspects of the question – notably, whether or not the analyzed

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[45] Unless of course they are tied to a strictly controlled real-life community.

services help or hinder cultural diversity (the availability of cultural products) and layman criticism (or the relativization of cultural (Cultural) standards).
Again, both "forums" and "blogs" were found to be overly generalizing categories: even if an ideal type of such applications can be described, this ideal type will contain no information about its *contents*. The blogosphere is large and fragmented, the not-necessarily interlinked totality of forums is large and fragmented too. Nevertheless, I believe it can be established that blogs and forums potentially promote both the availability of cultural products and the practice of layman criticism. These developments do not offset or balance one another, rather, they work in tandem, towards a more fragmented and relativistic cultural public sphere.

Social news sites, for the time being, do not seem to provide much space for the promotion of products of the culture industry. This is explained by their very concept, or their emphasis on news (quickly perishable pieces of information). But it is expected that their focus will open towards other topics of the culture industry, apart from popular music, movies and computer games. (The current emphasis on technology in the case of social news sites is partly explained by a large portion of users being IT-experts or at least users with a penchant for technology. (Cf. PEJ 2007.))

6.6 Internet, mass media and public sphere – a short summary

In his latest return to the subject of the public sphere, Habermas (2006: 9) downplayed the importance of the internet in making it more democratic, and named its help in tackling censorship as its single important positive contribution. In contrast, Bruns (2007) argues that the internet establishes a democratic organization and production of information on the internet, and thereby offers its users meaningful participation in the affairs of the public sphere. The "paradox of plenty" does not apply: "as networked information has grown, so have the tools available for making sense of it" (Bruns 2007).
The analysis of blogs, forums and social news and bookmarking sites suggests that the truth is somewhere in between these two approaches.
It is true that the internet in general, wherever it is available, democratizes access to information. But at the same time, the supposedly democratic tools and services of information production and dissemination still rely on the institutionalized,

organizational media for "raw material" (it might be, that such services – e.g. blogs – become part of this media institution themselves). I would not, on the other hand, call this reliance "parasitic" (cf. Habermas 2006: 9). Blogs, forums and especially social news and bookmarking sites show how, thanks to the hypertextual nature of the internet and the availability of multiple alternative sources, the existing framework and agenda of the media might be rearranged. Under certain circumstances, blogs, forums and social news sites might constitute highly influential advocacy media. The best setting for such media would be provided by social news sites, because these promote *deliberative, egalitarian* and *democratic* treatment (filtering) of available information. But the internet is no panacea from any point of view. Most importantly, the effective operation of the above mentioned services is tied to an optimal number of users. (This is, naturally, a precondition that applies to *offline* establishments of the public sphere, too, even if we disregard the Madisonian interpretation of democracy.)

Returning to the question posed in the introduction of this thesis, analysis of said web services suggests that the hypothesis of “paradox of plenty” is too simplifying. The research indicates that fragmentation does hinder the efficiency of blogs, forums and social news sites. But the 'net also offers increased *connectivity*, and as Habermas (2006: 25) himself noted, the multiplication of *connected*, *overlapping* issue publics might in fact counter the effects of fragmentation.

Further, if there is one marked point this thesis would like to make is that the use of umbrella term such as “blogs” or “forums,” while useful in describing overall potential and possibilities of the internet, is discouraged in the concrete analysis of the internet's effects on the public sphere: given the huge differences between instances of these various categories, it is through the analysis of these particular instances that meaningful and precise conclusions can be drawn. If the internet has the *potential,* through enabling a democratic access to communication channels, to create spheres of democratic, deliberative discourse, whether or not this potential is actualized depends on the characteristics of particular web services and the technologies they utilize.

Of the services analyzed in this paper, it is social news sites that were found to have the greatest chance of contributing meaningfully to the public sphere; but the in-depth analysis of particular social news sites remains the task of subsequent research.

7 Suggested further research

A logical continuation of this thesis would be researching where exactly the optimal "population range" stretches for various web services (blogs, social news sites etc). It is expected that the ideal number of users varies in function of e.g. the contents and the purpose of the website.

An in-depth and long-term content analysis of certain influential websites – blogs, social news sites and discussion forums – could supply further proof concerning their dependence on established, organizational, institutionalized media, and consequently, their ability to alter or expand the agenda and framing of news of this media.

In addition, further research is encouraged to examine how "traditional" or mainstream media embraces new technologies, with particular focus on how established, well-known, mainstream media organs utilize alternative sources.

Particular online services could also be analyzed within an intercultural framework. As I noted in chapter 6.4, the free-to-choose virtual identities break down certain barriers and contribute to an open channel of communication, facilitating intercultural communication. The analysis of such acts of communication is expected to reveal both cultural idiosyncrasies[46] and information on how these idiosyncrasies (related e.g. to the use or mode of consumption of certain web services) converge in the communication process itself.
I would once again underline the importance of these cultural differences concerning the very use of the internet. As I have mentioned, the internet is unquestionably the product of the West, and this fact might be inherently represented in its services and the way it is expected to be used – and it is expected to be interesting to look at how particular cultures relate to this "embedded Westernness" of the global network.
On the other hand, I might be overestimating the cultural embeddedness of the internet

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[46] See for example the suspected cultural embeddedness of the Japanese *2-Channel* discussion board (chapter 5.4).

(in general, but not its individual services in particular!). In any case, it would be worth carrying out further inquiries into this topic, to establish points of orientation for the analysis of examples of intercultural (online) communication. Subsequently, it is suggested that intercultural communication is analyzed both in the discussion of issue publics formed around non-identity-related topics (e.g. in the discussion forum about a hobby or a professional area of expertise) and in the discussion of issue publics formed around a group identity.

The technology of wikis, and Wikipedia in particular, is also recommended for further study. I have, in this paper, found that the reason why social news websites can contribute effectively to the public sphere is that discussion conducted on them is *consequential*. On a forum or a blog, there is no external factor that would incite participants of a discussion to carry out reasoned debate – in contrast, social news sites have a very definite purpose (to filter the media output), which means that participation in their operation has tangible consequences. It does matter, and similar is the case of wikis.

A wiki is a set of tools that enable documents to be created online by the contribution of a group of people. Documents in a wiki can be edited simultaneously by several users; the changes will be kept track of, and space is provided for discussion about the edited document as well. Wikis can be used for many purposes. The most important of these purposes, from the point of view of the public sphere, is that wikis can be used to create user-contributed knowledge databases (such as Wikipedia), and that they can be used to actualize "participatory democracy," giving every citizen the right to modify e.g. drafts of bills (see for example New Zealand's new police act (New Zealand Police 2007)).

Once again, discussion on wikis is always secondary, it is never for itself. Discussion is instrumental to cooperation, to the creation of one, single piece of document. In addition, if the wiki in question has some kind of authority – via its popularity or official status (for instance, being run by a governmental organization) –, then the resulting combination means that, unlike in the case of blogs and forums, the creation of an alternative "counter-wiki" is not advised, even if the tools to create yet another wiki are readily available for everyone. (If one does not agree with a particular definition on Wikipedia, one might decide to create a new blog or a new wiki altogether to present

another, competing view on the subject. But one might also choose to modify Wikipedia's entry – and, simply by the popularity of this website, this latter solution will be much more efficient than the former.)
Hence, whether dealing with the discussion of opinions focused around a practical problem, or with the encyclopedic collection of facts, wikis are worthy of further, in-depth analysis, because they can become highly influential in both the political and the cultural public sphere.

In connection with the culture industry, and especially focusing on music, movies and computer games, an analysis of the new distribution methods (legal or illegal digital downloads) of the internet is recommended. It might be that these distribution methods will irrevocably transform the culture industry (or industries); such an analysis would not step outside the framework outlined in this paper, i.e. it would not necessarily take a side in the debate between supporters of the original theory of the culture industry and the advocates of multiple culture industries – because in this "debate" parties are approaching the subject matter using a different theoretical framework.

Finally, on a "micro-level," as mentioned in chapter 5.4.7, the research of peculiarities and practicalities of online written communication (i.e. online language variations, or the use of non-verbal communicative tools) is also recommended.

Works cited

Note: for usability reasons, I have shortened the particularly long and cumbersome website addresses with the help of the TinyURL webservice. This way, long address can be, without losing any data, shortened; for example, the link ***http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/06/AR2007090602560.html*** *points to the same website as* ***http://tinyurl.com/2h9rrs.*** *TinyURL addresses work just like any other web address – TinyURL keeps track of which short address is matched with which "real one" in its impressively huge database.*

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APPENDIX – Tables cited.

Table 1. Worldwide internet penetration rates

Region	**Population (2007 est.)**	**Population % of world**	**Internet usage**	**Internet usage in % of population (penetration)**	**Usage % of world**	**Usage growth (2000 – 2007)**
Africa	933,448,292	14.2%	43,995,700	4.7%	3.5%	874.6%
Asia	3,712,527,624	56.5%	459,476,825	12.4%	36.9%	302.0%
Europe	809,624,686	12.3%	337,878,613	41.7%	27.2%	221.5%
Middle East	193,452,727	2.9%	33,510,500	17.3%	2.7%	920.2%
North America	334,538,018	5.1%	234,788,864	70.2%	18.9%	117.2%
Latin America / Caribbean	556,606,627	8.5%	115,759,709	20.8%	9.3%	540.7%
Oceania / Australia	34,468,443	0.5%	19,039,390	55.2%	1.5%	149.9%
World total	**6,574,666,417**	**100%**	**1,244,449,601**	**18.9%**	**100%**	**244.7%**

Source: Miniwatts 2007.

Notes from the original source: ***(1)*** *Internet Usage and World Population Statistics are for September 30, 2007.* ***(2)*** *Demographic (Population) numbers are based on data contained in the world-gazetteer website.* ***(3)*** *Internet usage information comes from data published by Nielsen//NetRatings, by the International Telecommunications Union, by local NICs, and other other reliable sources.* ***(4)*** *For definitions, disclaimer, and navigation help, see the Site Surfing Guide.* ***(5)*** *Information from this site may be cited, giving due credit and establishing an active link back to* ***www.internetworldstats.com****. Copyright © 2007, Miniwatts Marketing Group. All rights reserved worldwide.*

Table 2. Languages of the blogosphere

Language	**Share of new posts on blogs, Q4 2006**		Language	Share of new posts on blogs, Q4 2006	
Japanese	**37%**		French	2%	
English	**36%**		Portuguese	2%	
Chinese	**8%**		German	1%	
Italian	3%		Farsi	1%	
Spanish	3%		Other	5%	*Source: State of the live web report (Sifry 2007)*
Russian	2%		**Total**	**100%**	

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May all plumbers be fished.

A. Sz.