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The Internet Soapbox
Perspectives on a changing public sphere

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Introduction

The concept of the public sphere has for several decades represented one of the most powerful theoretical junctions between media studies and political sociology. It provides political media studies with a broader theoretical framework that connects the media to democracy and legitimacy of politics, and it specifies how democracy works or does not work in practice. From Jürgen Habermas’ first writings, it provided a theoretical horizon of lost opportunities in advanced capitalist societies. Subsequently it emerged as an intake to analyse the critical and democratic potential of the mass media – and then the new digital media (Habermas 1989, 1993).

The book confronts predominating political theory with actual changes followed by the web and social media facing the public sphere. It seeks to clarify to what extent political theory takes account of such changes, and vice versa, the book examines in what ways contemporary Internet development continues to carry further the values of openness and argument. The general idea in the following chapters is to mobilise political ideas that directly and indirectly address the nature and functions of our current amorphous and complex public sphere, with an emphasis on the implications of the Internet, including the web and social media. I will argue that the predominant normative concept of ‘the public sphere’ is unsuited to help us understand contemporary opinion-formation and legitimacy.

I cannot here go into the broader debate on the role of web and social media in everyday life and identity building. This was the topic for another book, Personal Media and Everyday Life (2014). Nor will I delve deeply into specifics of the various social media and platforms, or in how they differ in mediating political debate. Rather, the Internet is more generally addressed as a set of platforms for political communication, or simply as a political infrastructure. In two stages, this infrastructure is targeted by market and state power: On the one hand, the historical neutrality of the Internet accommodates the strongest corporate players in the market of Internet-based social interaction, due to the absence of market regulation. The background for this lies partly in the notion of the Internet as a ‘Cyberspace’ where information wants to be free, partly in American entrepreneurial lib-
eralism. On the other hand, after the era of the ‘electronic frontier’, the Internet is currently subject to state-driven interventions. In particular, protection of copyright, extensive surveillance and the struggle against cyber-crime motivate this interest in intervening in the Internet, which affects its function as political infrastructure in democratic societies.

How are we to understand the condition for political discourse in the age of communication titans, NSA surveillance and copyright policing? Does political theory account sufficiently for the nature of the Internet-based political discursive space we call the public sphere? Or does dominating political theory tend to divert our attention by producing unrealistic expectations? How can the public sphere in general, and its digital dimension in particular, be addressed less normatively and more realistically? These are questions I address in this book.

I discuss some aspects of positions that hold public reason to be not only a possibility, but the pivotal medium for, and outcome of, public discourse. Discussion itself, the deliberation-approach argues, tends to render the ultimate decision legitimate in the eyes of the participants. This subsequently reproduces solidarity and improves the implementation of the actual and coming decisions. When everyone’s views are open for discussion, it is argued, people would be more inclined to support decisions simply because they, or someone who speaks their opinions, feel that they have been involved.

Contestation- and conflict-oriented positions, on the other hand, argue that public discourses are battles for recognition and interests, battles with words: The point is to gain hegemony, to win or at least not lose without a fight. Contrary to a deliberative approach, conflict and contestation-inclined scholars argue that the longer and more involved in a discussion conflicts are, the more moralised and therefore deeper they become. Rather than becoming hostages to the debate and its outcome, divides may develop and conflicts escalate. Psycho-sociological mechanisms of rationalisation would tend to tie the individual to one of the parties of the conflict.

Having addressed some central points in normative perspectives on public reason and contestation, I discuss how the Internet takes part in structurally transforming the public sphere. I then draw on sociological and non-idealist insights in order to encircle a more realist view. I draw on such unlikely bedfellows as sociological systems theory (Niklas Luhmann) and political realism (Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss and others). The purpose is not to construct a realist theory of the Internet-based public sphere, but rather to point out insights on which such a theory can build.
I should add here that I have reservations about the concept of *Öffentlichkeit*, particularly with its translations, such as ‘public sphere’ or ‘espace publique’. My impression is that such terms tend to institutionalise public debate to the degree that one ends up assuming such a normative space as a bottom-up pillar for democracy. They may cause unnecessary complications for an undogmatic theorisation on the relationship between political communication and political government. It seems to have become a favorite term for those who want to ‘solve’ problems of democracy.¹ And yet the term is already inscribed with meaning and is at the center of all such debates to the degree that I have decided to stick with it here. My reservations concerning its dubious normativity should become clear all the same.

*  

The dominant positions in political theory and political philosophy from the 1980s on, notably those building on John Rawls’ and Jürgen Habermas’ political thought, brought political theory to a new level by integrating political efficiency with political public legitimacy in the concept of public reason. Particularly the emphasis on legitimacy as public discourse opened perspectives for seeing the role of the media. And yet these theories, united as they are in a Kantian tradition, trapped political theory in a moral and idealist dead end that inhibited it from addressing pressing political issues. Political visions were (re)constructed that had less to do with what politics is about than about what we, in another world, would like politics to be. In this fashion, it in fact served as ideology, since it presented expectations of politics as though politics were of a general moral nature. I argue for a political theory that views politics as a distinct form of communication and that needs to be judged on its own terms. On this background of political theory, I examine the political use of Internet-based media for two reasons: First, to examine political theory on the basis of specific changes in the public sphere, and second, because the Internet is the new symbolic object to which visions and dystopias are heavily attached. Terms like ‘netizens’ and ‘Cyberspace’ reflected an avant-garde notion about communication for a democratic society that was later proven to be of little help.

I argue that the Internet contributes to the diversity of views in the public sphere and to the broadening of participation, but also that it complicates observation of the political public sphere from the point of view of politics. In this, the Internet

¹. In the beginning of the 1990s, Pierre Bourdieu called it a ‘detestable’ concept (Bourdieu 2014, 306).
seems to balance or reverse the effect of the mass media. A key question is however in what ways the Internet and mass media are connected in terms of circulation of news and debate. Generally, the public sphere should be seen as consisting of contradictory and contingent dimensions, oriented towards different participatory groups, styles and issues.

In addressing the political roles of the Internet, I will not go into the use of the Internet in election campaigns or the problem of the digital divide (see DiMaggio et al. 2001; Hargittai et al. 2008; Norris 2001; Schlozman et al. 2010). Nor will I discuss the role of the web and social media in the struggle for democracy in developing countries (e.g. Lynch 2012). Although relevant for the dynamics of the public sphere, these issues represent special cases of political communication discussed as topics in their own right. Also, research that connects the Internet with democracy and politics has differentiated into specialised branches, some of which have also developed new and advanced methods to harvest massive data from the online sources directly (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Hindman 2008; Lawrence et al. 2010). I prefer to focus on the main (and seemingly contradictory) problems that have been addressed concerning the Internet as a political infrastructure.

Chapter 2 addresses the theory or perspective of deliberative democracy, particularly as it developed as a way out of the impossible position of Rousseau, on the background of new Kantian and communication-oriented frameworks. I address central points in the political writings of Rawls and Habermas, and various versions of the theory of deliberative democracy in the footsteps of the two distinguished scholars of the period, including the more critically inclined, such as Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib. My approach here is to simply discuss its most central arguments that have been presented by the deliberative position on how a legitimate and an efficient foundation for rational decision-making can be reached. The arguments are, in short, that open and free deliberation can reconstruct consensus as a reachable aim in an analytical sense, if not always in practice. It is procedural in that it feeds back to its own conditions for a free debate among free persons. It makes a point about being public in that it restricts manipulation, and ties statements to their speakers. In particular, I critically examine the claim to impartiality that the theory of deliberative democracy defends. I conclude that the deliberative democracy approach is suffering from unrealistic political understanding and weak historical anchoring. As a construction, it tends to assume what it seeks to explain: rationality, public reason, consistency. As a normative theory of democracy, I argue that it presents a model of public communication that obscures the fundamental nature of disagreement in politics and the historical nature of discourse.
In Chapter 3 these points are pursued in a discussion of some vital aspects of the contestation or conflict approach in political theory. The chapter addresses how the critique of deliberative democracy derived from, and was attempted to develop into, an alternative contestation approach. This approach was prominent in the 1990s as a critique of Rawls in particular and as a position for feminist, racial and ethnic currents in society that were reclaiming the post-Marxist interest-perspective. The point of entering the public sphere was not consensus, but winning battles against the state concerning autonomy and recognition. These battles consist of rhetoric and strategy. I particularly refer to Chantal Mouffe’s notion of an ‘agonistic’ democracy. These thoughts about the nature of politics in a society of economic inequality sketched out the contours of a neo-democratic kind of politics. I suggest what kind of idea of public political communication is derived from the contestation approach to politics, and argue that it was too committed to temporary identity struggles that emerged from the free culture of the 1970s. While the contestation approach addressed important critical remarks against deliberative theory, it never developed a notion of public political discourse, and even less into a theory of political decision-making in a complex democracy.

Chapter 4 examines the notion of a political public sphere in general, and the role of the Internet in particular. I very briefly present Habermas’ idea in his early and well-known treatise and then go into his more recent writings on the subject, often linked to the European situation. I also discuss his view on the more wide-reaching concept of political communication. The purpose here is to clarify the role of the media in the theory of the public sphere as it appears in Habermas, and other scholars of the public sphere, such as Benjamin Barber and Michael Schudson. I argue that the notion of a public sphere is too normative and ideal in its structure, and cannot address properly the real challenges that contemporary politics is up against, in Europe or elsewhere. Consequently, the understanding of the media and the Internet is underdeveloped as it one-sidedly stresses their democratic potential and failure to fulfil such. Ideal models of the public sphere ignore questions of struggle and oppression that are taken more seriously in the contestation approach presented in the previous chapter.

Chapter 5 examines more closely the recent structural changes of the political public sphere. I present an overview of contemporary research on political participation through digital media, and the Internet as a recent structure for the public sphere. In particular, I examine Yochai Benkler’s theory of the networked public sphere as it was presented in his important book *The Wealth of Networks* from 2006. By bringing together network analysis, Internet optimism and liberalism, Benkler provided us with an important and highly stimulating exposition of tech-
nology and democracy. Benkler’s intriguing interweaving of public sphere theory and network analysis enabled him to understand the structural nature of the public sphere more closely. However, as he interpreted empirical findings in a distinctly normative (and optimistic) way, his conclusions hardly describe the current Internet. Rather, network analysis is a well-chosen analytic framework to explain absence of democratisation on the Internet caused by monopolisation by corporations like Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Google. Benkler presents a powerful theory of a phenomenon on the Internet that more and more stands out as a remarkable exception: Wikipedia.

In Chapter 6, I continue the discussion of the previous chapter by arguing that the public sphere develops gaps and divides. A key term here is differentiation, which refers to both social and technological change. A differentiated and partly Internet-based political public sphere constitutes challenges for a political system in its search for a public opinion. There exists, for example, no European public sphere apart from the counter-publics that reduce or undermine political legitimacy. Naturally, topics circulate and may provide some degree of stability and sense of justification. The never-ending circulation of communication simulates democratic discursive processes. The structural challenge today is dividing of public political communication and the increasing differentiation of groups, topics and styles that reduces its ability to provide political power with the legitimacy it needs to handle the serious challenges of our time. I argue that the Net seems to be characterised by a duality, possibly a dualism between the grass roots with their social media, and political elites with their social, as well as ‘big’ media. Based on extended research on the political use of the Internet, I suggest that the Internet in particular has yielded an internal differentiation in the shape of a main duality between a narrow, formal circulation of political topics, and a wide-ranging, informal underbrush of diffuse exchange of quasi-political expression. I argue that the connection between the two dimensions is vital for the view of the public sphere as a pillar for democracy.

Chapter 7 sketches out some thoughts about how a realist approach might view the public sphere. I begin with the critiques, presented in this book, of the deliberative approach, the conventional public sphere approach as well as of the contestation approach. Political realism in political theory replaces idealism and moralism for a more cool-eyed perspective on the political as a specific area of action and communication. It acknowledges political morality as a specific kind of morality and history as the context of all political action. It points out that public debate is a way to produce consent and legitimation for government and political decisions. The public sphere is in no command of any inherent normative leaning
towards democratic discourse. All political struggle is also a struggle for expressing oneself and being heard. I also warn against exaggerating the significance of the public sphere, since legitimation can be acquired through multiple institutions, such as courts and public administration.

Finally I conclude briefly (Chapter 8) by reminding the reader of the fact that commercialisation and monopolisation on the Internet have made it less suited as an instrument of democracy, compared to what was projected as recently as around the turn of the century. What is needed, I concur with Niklas Luhmann, is a ‘secular’, non-normative view of public communication as reflexive and complex circulations of topics. Similarly, I advocate a realist approach that does not measure the political participation on the Internet against moralist ideals, which it never can fulfil.

Working with this book, I have drawn on sections of some of my previously published articles. Here, they are reformulated and put into a different argument:

◗ Rasmussen, T. (2014) Internet and the Political Public Sphere. Sociology Compass Vol. 8(12) 1315–1329.

Finally I wish to thank colleagues and people at conferences with whom I have discussed these matters. I particularly would like to express my gratitude to Professor Peter Dahlgren for valuable comments.
Chapter 2

Deliberating democracy:
Rationality as publicness

Following J.-J. Rousseau, only agreement – unanimity – may provide the complete and perfect legitimacy for a political order. It is based on individualism and human limitations (thus law) at the same time. When all individual wills unite, a true polity can secure the individual and collective good. In Rousseau, democratic rule is based upon the productive fiction of the will of all, the sovereign which is unanimous, enlightened and always already in place. It has no minority vote that is silenced by a majority and therefore may claim rights. The challenge is for the people to know what this idea stands for, what is already known. How do people reach knowledge about the common good? Rousseau’s only answer is not considered viable in a large-scale pluralist society by most observers: Decision must be made by the people itself or by their agent in the knowing of the civic religion of the community (Benhabib 1994, 30). Only in this way are individual wills obeying the common will, in fact him-, or herself. Only in this way is it possible to understand how the individual can obey a common will and still be free. A minority opinion rests then on a misunderstanding or misinterpretation about the general will. A point on which we may see more than reminiscences in communitarian theory is that people are not really asked to say their opinion about a particular proposition, but their opinion on the already determined general will on the proposition. To Rousseau, politics is about making decisions based on the general will that always already exists. (Manin 1987, 348).

Emmanuel Joseph (Abbé) Sieyès, the political theorist of the French revolution, pulled this principle closer to everyday politics, by accepting majority and representation. When unanimity cannot be reached for reasons of scarcity and necessity, it still is important to recognise it in the pluralism of society. This was the lesson of Sieyès, which made him argue for the majority principle, of which he spotted several attributes of unanimity; and therefore could step in for it (Manin 1987, 342). Majority is a practical necessity, which is justified both in its partial equivalence with unanimity and in its practical ability to make decisions. Most
moral philosophy can however only justify the majority principle as a second best, due to lack of time, demography and of objective conflict of interests in the population.

This chapter briefly examines the deliberation-democratical attempt to reconcile legitimacy with rational decision-making. Deliberation harmonises the individual and the collective in, not the will of all, but the deliberation of all. I address some prominent deliberative approaches (Rawls and Habermas among others) and qualify them as strong and weak approaches. I then critically discuss the most controversial claim of deliberative theory: its claim to the possibility of impartiality in public debate.

**DELIBERATION OF ALL**

Bernard Manin notes that deliberation, in contrast to Rousseau and partly Rawls, is the process by which everyone’s will is formed, that confers its legitimacy on the outcome, rather than the sum of already formed wills. It is necessary to contradict a long tradition, writes Manin, in affirming ‘that legitimate law is the result of general deliberation, and not the expression of the general will’ (Manin 1987, 352). He notes that when individuals approach politics, they do not know what they want. ‘We are justified in taking as a basis for legitimacy not their predetermined will but the process by which they determine their will. This is the process of deliberation. […] Without renouncing a concern for legitimacy, which in the modern world can only be based on the individual, deliberation makes it possible to avoid the exorbitant requirements of universality and unanimity’ (Manin 1987, 364).

Rousseau required that the entire people must authorise legislation. His confidence in reason was secondary to that of preferences or inclinations. Only law sanctioned by the entire people and then exercised equally, can be considered fair, and therefore legitimate. In law the impulsivity and instability of the general will is bounded and transformed into stable and specific law. It is not sufficient to rely on hypothetical criteria on what the people is likely to think, given by a representative assembly. Representation will not do because they would set themselves above the people. There can be no other sovereign than the people. The General Assembly can only consist of the people in person, or as Rousseau states elsewhere, agents who are obligated to vote and act according to the will of the people. Only in this way is it possible to guarantee that legislation reflects the will of the people, and that they are likely to obey the law. This is the principle of double generality (Kaufman 1997, 44). Or we could call them the principles of representative
democracy and legitimacy. The law must be enacted by all citizens through the
general will, and it must apply to all citizens in the same way. It is in the human
nature to conceive of this double principle as just.

Rousseau articulated the paradoxical foundations for public opinion and democ-

Rousseau articulated the paradoxical foundations for public opinion and democracy. Today, Benhabib argues, the answer lies in the processes of collective deliberations, the contemporary stand-in for Rousseau’s general will, and therefore what collective decision-making processes should attempt to approximate. The elo-

Habermas argues that ‘The deliberative mode of legislative practice is not intended
just to ensure the ethical validity of laws. Rather, one can understand the complex
validity claim of legal norms as the claim, on the one hand, to compromise com-
peting interests in a manner compatible with the common good, and, on the other
hand, to bring universalistic principles of justice into the horizon of the specific
form of life of a particular community’ (Habermas in Benhabib 1996, 25).

PUBLIC DELIBERATIVE PROCEDURES

The central idea of deliberation is the idea that providing reasons acceptable to oth-
ers will tend to enhance normative convergence that grounds and legitimates polit-
cal, often coercive, decisions. Deliberation is viewed as reconstructive and ideal-
ised procedures of public communication where an interchange of reasonable
arguments leads to agreement – on some level. Valuations and reasons are in a
deliberative view dictated by the public through a public process where the public
filters out what issues ought to be the object of political decision-making, and what
direction such decisions should take. Decisions are in this way already endorsed in
common among members of the public (Pettit 2004, 59). The overall aim of delib-
eration is to legitimately enable decision-making and minimise conflict.

Deliberation is reconstructive in that it might take place in current democracies,
but often in highly imperfect ways and often not at all, due to exogenous causes.
Therefore, the principle might be used normatively as a model on which actual
democratic procedures might be assessed. Its procedural aspect infers that condi-
tions of communication need to be considered fair, and include free individuals
protected by legal rights.

Most importantly, it is public for many reasons; transparency inhibits manipu-
ation and control. Lobbying, for instance, is from a deliberative approach seen as
a problem, because of its intransparent nature. Reasonable arguments need to be
public in order to be considered attractive and persuasive to others. It acknowledges the necessity for a modern society to make a series of decisions involving the preferences and interests of its citizens, which all the more underline the importance of legitimacy. Public deliberation takes ‘hostages’: it ties individuals to opinions in the early phases of an opinion-formation process that they feel are hard to abandon later on.

Legitimacy in a Rawlsian conception of liberal democracy is a matter of public justification in accordance with the constitution, which all citizens are expected to endorse. To Habermas, legitimacy emerges in several layers of the public sphere and lifeworld-grounded communicative action, and through the principles of discourse ethics, modified from Apel’s universal ethics. In both, public (as opposed to private), reasonable communication is essential, which subsequently lead to reasonable and acceptable decisions. Habermas however, is far more detailed and sociologically inclined in his normative, but also occasionally empirical, interest in the public sphere as the testing bed and sounding board of deliberative democracy. Rawls’ example of a site practising reasonable deliberation – the US Supreme Court – impresses no sociologist.

John Rawls’s concept of ‘public reason’ points to the central principle of legitimacy in a liberal democracy. Justification of principles must take place in a concrete, social process that is political in a wide sense, in addressing politically relevant questions, and yet connected to moral norms. The reasonable way to proceed should be seen as the result of an *overlapping consensus* in the political culture. Rawls points towards the principle of autonomous public and reasonable communication as the procedure where decisions are legitimated and grounded. The aim is binding agreement, preferably on the basis of the substantial output, or at least on what is at stake, which makes any acceptable output from what is seen as a democratic process legitimate. A less ambitious (but I would say just as important) aim of public deliberation is to avoid or minimise conflict, particularly violence. A common source of conflict is a feeling of exclusion in questions that the group thinks should be heard. Public debate prevents this by opening the floor for all groups and viewpoints.

The principle of *impartiality* is key in the public deliberative approach to ensure that everyone involved experiences fair and acceptable procedures, and from this, legitimacy. In the deliberation approach, legitimacy is viewed as endogenous consent or acceptance resulting from public reasoning among free and equal citizens. If public justification is allowed to legitimate decisions, the distance between the decision and one’s own preferences cannot be too long. If the end result tends to be suboptimal for many or all in the communication process, Przeworski (in Elster...
1998) has argued, legitimation in the form of justification will probably not take place. Ideally, impartiality requires considerable time and space; deliberation and representation in the whole society. Hasty decisions and incomplete representation represent the main obstacles to impartiality (Gargarella, in Elster 1998, 260).

Deliberation is a key to impartiality because it informs all those involved about the essential knowledge and viewpoints in question, and forces all participants to filter out the most self-interested arguments. What Jon Elster calls the ‘civilizing force of hypocrisy’ (Elster 1998, 12) implies that even self-interested speakers will tend to argue in terms of the public interest because of the normative presuppositions in public discourse about necessity of reasoning, if one wants to influence the debate. Adherents of deliberative theory argue that a winning strategy is to emphasise the arguments that presumably will persuade others, and to suppress self-interested claims. Conformism and mainstreaming (the spiral of silence) will also tend to suppress extreme views. Another civilising force relates not to the taming of egocentrism but to the problem of extremism: Public deliberation may bring participants to see their own latent prejudice in a wider perspective, and either opportunistically modify them or become convinced that they are ethically unacceptable.

These arguments of civilising forces that handle psychological opportunism and manipulation are of a less noble character than Habermasian theory about implicit norms of normative rightness in discourse. The vital difference is that Elster’s and other views can without problem be combined with views that tend to stress that public debate rarely enhances consensus. Deliberation is an education process by which exchange of opinions assists the reproduction of a rational and moral base for politics. Lastly, it clarifies reasoning by testing reasons in debate. Particularly this last point makes the deliberative approach argue that contrary to other approaches, deliberation generates not only legitimate output, but also qualitatively better solutions. In this sense, the outcome of deliberation may be seen as a collective good, produced by the procedure that enabled it.

APPROACHES TO DELIBERATION

Today the deliberative approach to democracy represents the dominant paradigm in liberal political theory, and has done so since the mid-1990s. Since then, it has moved from a strong to a weaker (or from a thick to thin) version. In spite of the influential contributions of Rawls and Habermas, a moderate version, which includes empirical considerations on the public sphere, seems to prevail.
Strong deliberative theory emphasised discursive and cognitive processes of justification at various public levels in society that change preferences of those involved, and enhance preferential convergence and consensus – before decisions are finally made by the representative assembly. Habermas thus insisted that there is more to deliberation than fairness and impartiality. However, with the new emphasis on law in Between Facts and Norms, Habermas modified the weight on rational responsibility of the public sphere. In a rational division of labour, the public sphere provides themes and positions, whereas the decisions are left to formal, representative institutions.

The free reasoning among equals that a deliberative interpretation of democracy assumes is, according to Rawls, connected to a model procedure for the individuals involved, and for the society, which would encourage such reasoning procedures. Free reasoning is an ideal setting, which participants and institutions of society hold as a normatively right way to base decisions. Therefore, participants will appeal to considerations at a distance from one’s own desires, that are generally recognised as having weight, and will prioritise arguments which they think others will find acceptable. About why this is the case, the approaches differ. Still, there are few substantial differences between Rawls and Habermas’ more recent conception of the relationship between opinion-formation and will-formation, or between informal and formal political discourse. To be sure, Rawls has been more explicit than Habermas on the concern for stability, and less oriented towards the potential in the public sphere for instituting processes of social change. His reconstruction has been more limited in that it, in spite of its many improbable presuppositions, describes a reality not so far from the current status in what he calls well-ordered societies.

The idea of deliberative democracy, following Rawls, is based on three elements: one is the idea of public reason, the second is constitutional democratic institutions that specify the setting for deliberative legislative bodies, and the third is the knowledge and desire on the part of citizens to follow public reason ‘and to realize its ideal in their political conduct’ (Rawls 1997, 772). Rawls makes clear that Habermas’ concept of the public sphere and his own concept of public reason are not the same (Rawls 1995, 140 note). The public reason of political liberalism is the reasoning of legislators, executives and judges, candidates for public office and party leaders, and others who work in their campaigns, ‘and the reasoning of citizens when they vote on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. The ideal of public reason does not have the same requirements in all these cases.’ Habermas’ public sphere is, according to Rawls, much the same as what he called ‘the background culture’ in Political Liberalism. To Rawls, the background cul-
ture consists of the civil sphere of churches, associations, the university, and other scientific societies, and all kinds of political meetings. In other words, Habermas’ broader concept of a public sphere includes parts of Rawls’ public reason, most importantly the legislating assemblies. Habermas’ concept also includes weak informal publics, Rawls’ background culture, where notions about the good life thrive, but where public reason cannot be expected.

While Habermas includes the notion of a rational public sphere involving the communication of civil society, journalism and citizens who gather in political dialogue, Rawls, in the interest of securing a rational discussion on what is reasonable, distinguishes between public and non-public uses of reason. Public uses are will-formation in parliamentary, courtly and governmental, and party-related assemblies, and in political campaign debates (Rawls 1993 215-16). Non-public (social) reason is connected to more or less formal networks and associations in the civil sphere. In the domains of non-public uses of reason, reasons refer to particular comprehensive doctrines, whether they are moral, religious, or ideological worldviews. Rawls has no idea here of a rational or even reasonable public discourse among or across such movements or voluntary associations, which could approach one another discursively.

A difference here from Habermas is that Rawls’ domain of public reason is concerned with locating reasonable norms for society as a whole, whereas non-public use of reason in a society of a plurality of doctrines, is concerned about their respective norms and ideals. It is necessary for Rawls to restrict the public uses of reason in order to achieve some plausibility for reaching acceptable norms in an overlapping consensus. Democratic deliberation is reserved for formal political procedures due to the need for stability in a pluralist society. Here the chances are present that reasons are offered that could be endorsed or at least accepted by the other parties, because of their shared conception of justice for the pluralistic society as a whole. These are seen by Rawls as constitutional concerns that must be reserved for delimited deliberating for operating with a certain discipline. They can operate under the limits of how to reason what themes should be addressed, and how to give evidence for various positions. They are however to operate publically and through discourse with reasons and facts that are seen as widely accepted, in order for the norms to reach a status as public, and that need to be justified as such. While norms are developed in restricted representative fora, responsible citizens accept the limits of the public use of reason.

Rawls’ citizen engages in non-public, social uses of reason, that generate topics and positions for the deliberations that take place in fora of the public uses of reason, and the responsible citizen knows her civil duties and accepts the substantial
decisions. In the citizen’s moral duty of civility lies the responsibility to respect a decision that does not necessarily accord with one’s own beliefs and values.

Also, in Rawls, the burden of filtering topics from the non-public uses of reason into the public uses of reason seem to lie to the public uses of reason itself. This seems to him to be the most realistic and feasible solution in order to avoid political paralysis or destabilisation. Whereas Habermas places considerable emphasis on the normative crystallisations of apt political topics and rational arguments in the public sphere, Rawls leaves the transformation or translation from the diversity in society at large into the art of the possible, to politics itself. In practice, both projections see formal politics as exposed to pressures from below; from civil society and the public sphere on issues that require decisions; unjust conditions, signs of crisis will direct themselves to politics; the difference being that this power of the public and civil spheres is fully acknowledged in Habermas’ theory. In Habermas, political decision-making is validated by public and private autonomy in pragmatic, ethical and moral discourses secured by law. To what extent this may actually take place is an empirical question. The normative and reconstructive point in Habermas is that this is how it can and should emerge. Therefore, this is a reconstruction around which we ought to organise society.

Disagreement and struggle, as we know too well, takes place all the time; in Habermas, this fact points towards procedural and institutional imperfections, including social inequalities. But Habermas too would have to recognise that disagreements may be reasonable in that they bring in new ways to see things and reflect real conflict of values or of interest; he has also come to realise that some disagreements among ethical worldviews, particularly religious, may not be resolved discursively. These aspects put Habermas’ position closer to Rawls’ view on political institutions as arenas of reasonable overlapping consensus or compromise of comprehensive doctrines.

Rawls’ version is liberalist and contractual in that it in view of pluralism can settle for only a minimalist yet moral common denominator of institutional ways to distribute resources fairly. Under conditions of groups and citizens with reasonable worldviews, society is able to construct an overlapping consensus on how conflicts and disputes are to be settled in order for all to live together. Liberal theory claims to be neutral with respect to the plural conceptions of a good life, it merely postulates the realistic possibility for such a society to settle for some political principles for legitimate politics. If all parties can agree on some fair terms on how to settle conflicts, the results will be seen as fairly just by the involved reasonable, yet incompatible doctrines in the sense that all will respect the end result. Legiti-
macy is secured by the fact that all relevant groups, through the overlapping consensus, acknowledge the procedures. Rawls views the principle of overlapping consensus as more than a Hobbesian modus vivendi: the conception of such consensus as justice or fairness is presented as based on some basic and moral principles of justice, which would have to be accepted by all groups that want to be heard and accepted in society. It is stronger than a modus vivendi, and weaker than a common political culture: Rawls’ regulative idea of justice as fairness is presented as being appropriate to secure both pluralism and stability.

WEAKER APPROACHES

A set of views of what can be seen as public deliberation, as grounding for legitimate politics leads to a variety of proposals that concentrate more on broad public deliberation in the public sphere than proposed by Rawls, and other ways to justify the rationality of deliberation than in Habermas’ discursive ethics. Such a modified or reformed deliberative approach expands the concept of communication to include cultural and ‘disruptive’ forms of expression on the grounds that their underlying message might be of an argumentative or reasonable kind. Such a moderate view on deliberation states that changing of preferences might take place in favourable circumstances, but that what deliberation always does, is to generate a common understanding on the dimension of conflict, thus enabling consensus on what the disagreement is about. In this latter view, deliberation is a sorting and clarifying process, where some positions are transferred to the market or the private sphere, some are postponed, others are possibly agreed on, and finally some remain as a common understanding of the remaining conflict. On this ground a decision may be made that is less susceptible to instability, and more likely to stand as legitimate. Knight and Johnson (1994, 284) argue for a modest deliberative position: ‘Rather a political outcome is legitimate, if at all, because it survives the deliberative process, because it is produced by the sort of reasoned argumentation under fair procedures that defines deliberation as a critic ideal.’ In Jean Cohen’s version, the end result will not necessarily be consensus, but the public reasoning will tend to reduce the diversity of preferences, since they will be shaped underway by the public reasoning (Cohen in Elster 1998, 199). When an argument is considered to appeal to wide-spread considerations, decisions on the basis of it will have a good chance to be considered legitimate by the great majority.
Allen Buchanan states that ‘an entity has political legitimacy if and only if it is morally justified in wielding political power, where to wield political power is to attempt to exercise a monopoly, within a jurisdiction, in the making, application, enforcement of laws.’ (Buchanan 2002, 659–60) And yet, Buchanan’s understanding of moral justification is weak. He argues that the concept of consent is unsuited to the political world. It is extraordinarily demanding and in practice impossible to meet. Any political power that uses its capacity will fall short of the demand to consent simply because of the dominance embedded in any use of power. Consent complements political power; in practice, it would be impossible to combine or integrate the two: ‘If consent is really necessary for political authority then there are not and are never likely to be any entities that possess political authority’ (Buchanan 2002, 699). Few if any political powers such as governments have ever enjoyed consent from the vast majority of the citizens. That is not a serious problem: In political life, consent is neither necessary nor possible to legitimate political authority. Rather, politics is about how to conduct legitimate politics in a context of dissent. To make people obey the law, much is done if citizens feel that the law provides the protection of individuals and human rights, and that individuals have equal access to just institutions. But are we then still talking about moral justification?

The ‘republican’ Philip Pettit argues that democracy is a system for empowering the public reasons and common valuations recognised among people. It can, he argues, be projected as a two-dimensional ideal. The first dimension involves general elections to ensure that initiatives supported by people are identified and implemented. The second dimension is to ensure that only public valuation matters, ‘that whatever initiatives are adopted are justifiable by reasons that are commonly recognized as relevant in the public arena’ (Pettit 2004, 60). If the first dimension is guarded by general elections, the second must be ensured through what Pettit calls institutions that are largely contestatory in character. Individuals and institutions must be in the position to challenge government decisions, arguing that they are not well anchored in the public reasons recognised in the political community, and therefore should be buried. Pettit applies the metaphor of editors to illustrate the role of such individuals and institutions; the need to authorise the policies that the government and representatives have authored, because ultimately they are, together with the authors, the ultimately responsible. The notion of editors seems to be more than a metaphor here, since the mass media, along with the civil sphere organisations, are the chief agenda-setters of the political public sphere, and in the position to undertake investigative reporting and alarm the public sphere by blowing the whistle. What he calls ‘largely contestatory in
character’ could in this respect refer to critical journalism that spurs and disciplines critical public debate.

In 1994, Seyla Benhabib defined democratic legitimacy as ‘the belief on the part of the citizens that the major institutions of society and the decisions reached by them on behalf of the public are worthy of being obeyed’ (Benhabib 1994, 27). The definition is close to Weber’s. Legitimacy is people’s belief in the democratic institutions that rule, and nothing is said here about why and how the legitimacy comes about. More surprisingly, coming from a political philosopher, there are no validating criteria for what can be seen as legitimate. Neither does Benhabib’s definition privilege a deliberative understanding over other considerations. However, Benhabib adds that the recognition that the institutions truly are worth obeying can only be fulfilled ‘if such decisions are in principle open to appropriate public processes of deliberation’ (Benhabib 1994, 31).

Benhabib sympathises with the idea of deliberative democracy, and argues that a practical reason can be and actually is articulated in discussion. The deliberative model, following Benhabib, is proceduralist in that it emphasises institutional procedures and practices for attaining decisions on matters that would be binding for all. ‘Proceduralism is a rational answer to persisting value conflicts at the substantive level’ (Benhabib 1994, 34). Further, it recognises conflict of objective interest: ‘Procedures can be regarded as methods for articulating, sifting through and weighting conflicting interests.’ Procedures allow for a multitude of modes of political organisation and modes of articulation, including contestation. ‘It is through the interlocking net of these multiple forms of associations, networks and organizations that an anonymous “public conversation” results.’

PARTICIPATORY PARITY

Another deliberalist approach of a weaker kind is presented by Nancy Fraser. In discussions with Axel Honneth, Fraser (2001) has argued that his post-Hegelian way of treating recognition misses the point, and that recognition is a question of justice. Fraser laments the divide between the two positions, arguing that redistribution and recognition – currently seen in the debate during the 1990s about identity politics versus welfare politics – had drifted further away from one another, and the two corresponding positions in moral philosophy, morality and ethics (in Habermas’ terms) consider themselves mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, argues Fraser, there is no real contradiction between them; indeed, they are dependent on each other. Rather than belonging to two different moral categories (morality and
ethics), they address different dimensions of society (economy and culture): ‘Justice today requires both redistribution and recognition; neither alone is sufficient’ (Fraser 2001, 22).

But how are they to be reconciled? Nancy Fraser argues that the two positions of redistribution and recognition, morality and ethics, can be integrated by viewing claims for recognition as justice claims, and so make them reachable for moral justification. Contrary to Charles Taylor, Etzioni, Honneth and others, Fraser argues that recognition can be seen as an issue of justice and morality when it is considered as a question of status. Misrecognition is viewed as simply wrong because it denies certain groups the possibility of participation equal to other groups. As a universal norm, what Fraser calls ‘participatory parity’ can be seen as a binding norm if justifying under fair terms interaction under conditions of value pluralism (Fraser 2001, 27). Misrecognition means that certain groups cannot participate fully in society, which clearly is unjust. Fraser notes that the standard of participatory parity can only be applied dialogically and discursively through democratic processes of public debate. ‘In such debates, participants argue about whether existing institutionalized patterns of cultural value impede parity of participation and about whether proposed alternatives would foster it – without exacerbating other disparities. For the status model, then, participatory parity serves as an idiom of public contestation and deliberation about questions of justice’ (Fraser 2001, 41).

More strongly, Fraser adds, participatory parity represents the idiom of public reason, the preferred language for conducting democratic political argumentation on issues of both distribution and recognition. In Fraser’s attempt at treating recognition deontologically as a matter of justice (rather than as a matter of the good life), which can be justified or not in public debate according to standards of participatory parity, she adheres to a deliberation approach that negotiates between different ‘ethical’ positions without the ambition of normative consensus.

Fraser represents a ‘weak’ deliberative approach, which emphasises discussion and contestation without relying on discourse ethics or principles of cognitively generated consensus. Fraser is backed by Zygmunt Bauman and others in this (Bauman 2001, 145). In this model, struggles for recognition and procedural distributive justice form coalitions and campaigns of more temporary and issue-oriented character. Bauman concludes with his own terms that fusing the tasks of distributive justice and the policy of recognition is the meaning of social justice in the present ‘liquid-modernity’ era, while campaign politics compounding the two is its prime and perhaps its sole, available strategy.
THE PROBLEM OF IMPARTIALITY

Returning to Habermas and Rawls, we have seen that it is assumed that citizens must accept that when they take part in collective will-formation, they must consider the interests of all parties involved. This fact requires all who participate to consider all arguments about public interests, while ignoring arguments about private interests. This application of public reason works impartially, in that only general interests or particular interests that concern a wider collective (women, ethnic minorities, people with physical disabilities, etc.), can be taken into consideration as special cases.

This view sets certain standards and principles for the public sphere. The norm of impartiality is not considered viable by scholars who advocate the politics of contestation and identity recognition. To Iris Young (1990) and others, this detachment from values and desires under the banner of universality, distances politics from what it really is about: to engage in struggles for marginalised groups and particular interests. The deliberative norm of impartiality, Young argues, is really the norm of the dominant groups and interests, and is used against particular groups as informal mechanisms of exclusion. From the norm of neutral public reason, marginalised interests are seen as deviant, and attempts to speak out for them will tend to be ignored. An inclusive public sphere cannot operate with the norm of impartiality but will allow individuals and groups to argue from their particular interests and needs, as they experience them within their status as citizens.

The image of what we may call the public sphere of recognition looks different from the Habermasian public sphere in that it emphasises the aesthetic, affective and expressionist. It is characterised by individuals and groups that individually and collectively seek attention and visibility through various unorthodox means in order to gather support and to confront power in order to effect change for the particular group. Rather than arguing for improvements against the backdrop of the universal interests of society, improvements are claimed on the basis of the living conditions of the actual group. For this reason, the forms of presenting their interests and claims are not necessarily argumentative, but often symbolic, rhetorical, confrontational and demagogic. A politics of recognition is more concerned with symbolism in order to create support for policy initiatives. It also tends to focus on political leaders as symbols of struggles, rather as representatives of the people. Who they are is considered more important than in the deliberative approach, which is more narrowly concerned with how they argue. The focus on the identity of representatives in politics of recognition makes them less concerned with the distinction between public and private, which is considered as a means of domination.
The means of struggle may be drastic: civil disobedience, hunger strikes, violent confrontations. The police typically appear as a symbol of hegemonic power and to confront them occasionally is a point in itself. The primary aim is not to convince, but to attract attention, win support and challenge power. News reports and statements from a political administration that consider themselves impartial is rejected as such, because impartiality is seen as a particular form of power rhetoric. The problem of the public sphere seen from this perspective is not that public debate is biased vis-à-vis marginalised groups. The politics of recognition cannot argue along this way, as can deliberative perspectives. Rather, the problem according to the politics of recognition is that the interests of one’s own group are marginalised, treated badly or considered unworthy by society, or that the interests of the group (in abortion, wearing a turban or head scarf, praying at work, designed working spaces for physically disabled, etc.) are not met by the prevailing political power. In this view, impartiality is part of the problem. The hegemonic emphasis on reason and argumentation tends to leave out interests which are outside the political and cultural mainstream and in possession of little or no formal power to back their views.

A related problem is the point that impartiality is a means of ideology on the part of power that is reserved for the mainstream of society. Impartiality must be respected because it suppresses the tendency of giving our own interests unreasonable focus when weighted against other interests. Does it satisfactorily detect particulars of society? Or does this impartiality blind society from seeing groups and interests at the margin of the ordered, mainstream society? Does it create a bias toward majority, normal, middle class, male, interests? The multitude of incidents in Europe during years with stable social democratic or liberal Governments, more than suggests that large groups feel left out and that the legal/deliberative approach to democracy ignores them. Modern rule can attain its legitimacy without the consent of such groups. Modern societies are increasingly culturally and religiously pluralist, which poses particular challenges for a post-Enlightenment deliberative approach to politics. In other words, what is the deliberative reply to those who do not care to, or are not able to, deliberate? To those who feel that the main sites of the public sphere are closed for them? To those who walk the streets and squat buildings again and again, knowing that the political elite does not listen, but do it all the same.

The deliberalist-oriented reply is that without impartiality, the public sphere loses its democratic function, as it becomes reduced to a battlefield where all parties will lose, particularly minority interests. The question is rather: ‘How can the public sphere be configured so as to ensure that the claims of the marginalised will be heard and receive impartial consideration?’ (McBride 2005, 499). An answer
to this would be not to abandon the key principles of equality but to enhance them in order to include greater segments of the citizenry in deliberations, in order to enable the democratic discourses themselves to single out reasonable ways of resolving them. Additionally, the question is how decision-making procedures may be organised in more transparent and accountable ways through a number of democratic reforms like public hearings. In other words, the challenge from the politics of recognition is met with further democratisation of deliberation. The way is not to give special protection to groups, through institutionalising special group representation, group vetoes, etc. suggested by Young. This would only, according to McBride, strengthen counter-deliberative tendencies. In other words, not only deliberation, but also recognition can serve ideological purposes.

However, in many countries strong norms to ensure relatively equal gender representation exist in political institutions (in addition to technical election procedures, which ensure that less-populated areas in the periphery are de facto over-represented in the national assembly.) With regard to the public sphere ‘below and before’ decision-making procedures, McBride argues that if incentives for group representatives are to be the key mechanism for rendering the public sphere inclusive, ‘then the “differences” presented to the public must inevitably undergo significant pre-deliberative filtering and packaging prior to public consumption and may drastically inhibit the expression of dissent from within the groups concerned over and above its impact on deliberation more generally’ (McBride 2005, 500). However this problem can be, and actually is bypassed in some countries by designing a media subsidy structure that favours the opinionated quality press with a relatively small readership. Such a structure, decided through opinion-formation and will-formation in the public sphere and political fora, broadens and opens the public sphere for a more diverse set of interests and claims. Also the special privileges which benefit strong public service broadcasting companies in Europe, is justified on the basis of their constructive contribution to a public sphere. Rather than formal group representation, a middle way is state interventions in the public sphere on the structural level to allow for marginal interests, ‘lifeworlds’ and viewpoints to be heard and discussed.

TOWARDS AFFIRMATIVE PLURALISM?

For the stronger deliberative approaches, the concept of justice is key, however more as a goal than as a condition for consensus. How can a society reach a common understanding of justice as a basis for just politics? The emphasis is on the
procedure protected by law: If everyone accepts the process of deliberation as acceptable, the outcome must be considered legitimate. Political power is guided by the ideals invested in the procedure, and transformed there into generalised opinions. The emphasis is on how regimes of political principles or specific policies are constituted and formed through rational discourses at various levels of society. Politics is considered legitimate through a moral understanding backed in the concept of justice.

The deliberative approach argues that there is a strong link of legitimacy between political decision-making and the constitution of ‘popular will’ in deliberation. Political decisions, it is argued, are seen as legitimate because deliberation simulates a general will in a normatively stronger manner than elections. The deliberative approach tends to locate itself in a paradoxical position by stating its closeness to the Kantian and Rousseauian tradition on the general will; to recognise that legitimacy from a general will, if admirable, is unachievable in a large-scale democracy. The deliberative approach is simply, in Habermas’ words, an intermediate position between the republican-communitarian approach, and the liberalist-aggregative approach.

It is essential in the deliberative approach that not only elites but all citizens (in principle) must be included in deliberation at various levels, irrespective of their position and social status, and also that all available relevant facts and reasons are included in the deliberations. The ideal is broad inclusion of reasonable topics and viewpoints, which deliberation filters into agendas and proposals for political decision-making. Consequently, the challenge is to remove obstacles to inclusion, without turning to formal, positive discrimination mechanisms on a non-deliberative basis, such as instructing political parties to have a certain ratio of gender representation on the lists for general elections, reserving seats for particular minorities in the parliament, or giving particular groups particular veto rights.

The deliberative approach is concerned about the problems of unfair non-recognition, as a consequence of only recognising universal features (‘people’, citizens, etc.), which causes personal and social problems of many sorts. It has however, problems with the politics of recognition position, which argue that groups may demand extended right from arguments of difference rather than from arguments of equality. Only arguing from what defines oneself as individuals and groups, which may be essential to our identity, is met with scepticism on the grounds that the celebration of particularity and ‘authenticity’ is a turning away from society as a rationally governed collective. One should not be concerned about one’s particularities as such, but about one’s rights as a citizen despite particularities. Contrary to the politics of recognition (in contestation-oriented and
communitarian guises), the deliberative approach argues that there is no contradic-
tion between respect for particularities and universal reason. McBride argues
that the politics of recognition based on recognition as respect as particularly
developed by Axel Honneth, can be harmonised with the deliberative approach.
Confronted with a politics of egalitarian recognition aiming for respect, political
power can work for removing ‘inequalities that unfairly restrict the freedom of
persons to seek social endorsement of their identities and projects’ (McBride
2005, 502). And this, I may add, is a reconstructive view, because this is precisely
what took place during the previous century: hierarchies were flattened, the notion
of citizen was dramatically expanded, and the public sphere included new seg-
ments of the population. Within the frames of capitalism European society con-
ceived of itself as a more open, tolerant and egalitarian, pulling in new groups and
visualising discrimination, poverty and abuse. The effect of visualisation, facts
and debate has together yielded growing tolerance of minority needs. The argu-
ment has not been that groups were to be endorsed because of their particularity
(as ‘travelling people’, gays or mentally ill) but because everyone is entitled to
live according to their rights as citizens.

It is worth noting the mutual criticisms of totalising tendencies that have been
raised over the fence between varieties of politics of recognition and the deliber-
ative approach. Charles Taylor has argued that the prevalent Enlightenment
approach of democracy potentially underlines totalitarian tendencies in their
emphasis on the universal and undifferentiated nature of democracy, because it
may serve to suppress particularities like minorities. Conversely, McBride sug-
gests that what she calls the ‘politics of authentic recognition’ (Taylor) risks pur-
suing a totalising agenda by putting so much emphasis on securing others’ agree-
ment of one’s own values, ‘in the guise of promoting pluralism’ (McBride 2005,
503). This mutual suspicion only reflects the inherent tension in democracy
between minority and majority interests, that cannot be dissolved or resolved in
either of the two approaches. More important however, is that both perspectives
are actually operative in current societies and particularly in the public sphere, as
complements and correctives, which no doubt seem to add a further argument in
favour of the deliberative approach, since the struggle for recognition as respect
can only present claims within the discursive frame of deliberation and decision-
making.

The weight of the argument derives not only from the argumentative power but
more realistically from resources available and how much support the argument –
carried by an organisation or a movement – can mobilise in civil society and in the
public sphere. Reason is backed by strategic power. In so far as such power is
translated into votes or forms of numerical support in the public sphere (demonstrations, petitions), they are highly legitimate, Jane Mansbridge has argued in many contexts, for a normative understanding of democracy. No society and no politics exist without coercion. The ideal of coercion-free communication works as a dream to be pursued, perhaps even unavoidably because ideals are inherent in commonality. Even if it is impossible to reach, it could be used as a moral guiding light. That is however Habermas’ argument; to him the mission of political theory is hardly to produce illusions.

The sociological fact remains: no society has ever produced equality to the extent that differences of interest have been rendered irrelevant for the development of society. Social relations, particularly of some scale, are power relationships, and politics is, at best, about legitimate power, Herrschaft or rule. More than ever this is so in modern capitalist crisis-ridden societies. Legitimacy cannot be derived from a situation free from conflict, but neither can it be built upon conflict alone, since something must prevent the conflict from escalating. Jane Mansbridge is probably correct in concluding that, ‘In practice, actual democracies can produce at best a “rough” or “good enough” legitimacy, based on citizens’ generalisable interests in creating conditions of relatively willing cooperation (Mansbridge in Benhabib 1996, 54). They will always create only institutions ‘that are reasonably just in view of the circumstances’ or, that do not ‘exceed the limits of tolerable justice’.

Additionally, the willingness to accept certain forms of coercion probably tends to derive from a tacit and conventional consensus embedded in cultural values. We should also add another most important point: In contemporary Western Europe, people are aware of the brutal political conditions in regions such as northern Africa and the Middle East, and they know that political stability and a ‘liberalism of fear’ are important values in themselves and function as a legitimate condition. This also relates to the legitimacy of legality.

However, for Mansbridge and others close to an ‘agonistic’ approach, the procedurally fair and substantially just will remain as normative convictions for participants in the struggles, as will the almost unavoidable disappointments and frustrations that lead to new episodes in the never-ending story of social struggle. The perceived or experienced imperfections in all democratic procedures occasionally produce protests, strikes and sometimes civil disobedience, instantiated by formal but normally legitimate mechanisms. Nevertheless, legal and political settlements and compromises will tend to produce conflict. As the sociology of law tells us: Legal processes may reduce and enlarge conflicts.
Rather than simply emphasizing the importance of the public sphere, conflict-oriented or ‘contestative’ views point to the importance of a wide variety of social institutions that organise the disadvantaged, the different and the weak, like collectives, churches, interest groups, and cultural communities, where members see their interests and values protected or articulated in a deliberative manner. Some of these ‘counterpublics’ may take universalistic, for instance environmental, standpoints, while others may take local and delimited positions to specific problems. In some instances, as was the case in Istanbul in summer of 2013, a local modernisation issue evolved into a universalistic demand for a liberal democracy. The discourses may be of various cultural kinds, with little similarities to the public reason presented in quality newspapers. The aim may realistically not even be to win the battle, but to forge bonds of solidarity, reorient themselves, create new strategies and plan ahead (Mansbridge in Benhabib 1996, 58). She argues: ‘in the polity we can best preserve these irritants by encouraging ‘affirmative pluralism’ in democratic talk. In our democracies, we need to find ways of removing coercion as much as possible from the arenas in which we struggle to understand what is just and unjust. This means a public discourse not completely overwhelmed with the massive resources of existing forms of domination’ (Mansbridge in Benhabib 1996, 59).

CONCLUSION
What has been called ‘foundationalist’ theory, theory with the ambition to systematise and reduce morality to some principles and ideas, cannot adequately describe and sociologically appreciate substantial, personal and moral sentiments. A moral theory of the public sphere has the unrealistic ambition to formulate moral ideas for all domains or sectors of social life, which seems unrealistic and runs counter to at least some central social theories of differentiation. One could perhaps even argue that it runs counter to Habermas’ own use of systems theory. It makes more sense to address politics as historical products of a particular modern constellation, and to focus on consistency, institutional practices and their effects, the political development and use of morality, ways to formulate and see things, the application of power, responsibility, etc. We are concerned with the actual society. The sociological non-normative question is when and how citizens, often in one or another aggregated or synthesised version, in fact consider political power as legitimate in relation to a particular issue, a particular regime, or in relation to a political system. The guiding question is, What is going on? How has what is con-
considered reasonable or natural come to be seen like that? As sociology often does, we may construct our categories and types from actual practices we see unfolding. A critique of this is perfectly possible without normative ideals as a beacon or standard. I do not deny that basic political ideas are discussed in principal and moral terms, but the open and broad public sphere cannot be seen as impartial and procedural. The emphasis on a rational public sphere may have led to a displacement of politics in studies in the formation of public opinion. Since it tends to downplay the political mechanisms that seek to produce legitimacy from other norms, for instance from what is necessary or inevitable, it looks at people as citizens and as the sovereign body, which in practical politics it is not.

Rawls defines reasonable as those who accept liberal procedures, in other words political liberalism. Those who do oppose the liberal principles are in this way excluded from what is considered political in the liberal view, or relegated to the private sphere, because they unacceptably jeopardise the dominant liberal principles in the public sphere. Still political liberalism insists on its neutrality with respect to substance. That a certain minimal acceptance of political principles must be in place in order to take part in democratic discourse is evident, but this is also a political point of view, an argument for a distinct political perspective: political liberalism. What is unreasonable, viewed from Rawls’ perspective of political liberalism, may be fairly reasonable from another perspective. Rawls’ political liberalism cannot come across as anything but a particular model of political democracy, as the main features of a particular regime. Rawls gets caught, following Chantal Mouffe, in a circular argument: ‘political liberalism can provide a consensus among reasonable persons who by definition are persons who accept the principles of political liberalism (Mouffe in Benhabib 1996, 250). Mouffe argues that this is a logical conclusion in political liberalism because ‘antagonistic principles of legitimacy cannot coexist within the same political association without putting in question the political reality of the state. However, to be properly formulated, such a thesis calls for a theoretical framework that asserts that the political is always constitutive – which is precisely what liberalism denies’ (Mouffe in Benhabib 1996, 250).
Chapter 3

Discourse as contestation

As we have seen, Habermas and Rawls point to the possibility of anchoring legitimacy in public reasoning. This creates normative and rational solutions to specific social problems, and legitimacy in the form of shared beliefs or consensus. An impartial public procedure of argumentation enables reasonable solutions, which at once stand out publicly as reasonable and so receive consent. Legitimacy of political regimes, policies and institutions derives from the impartiality of such procedures and the freedom and political equality of those involved. Although aware of the empirical obstacles to a reasonable discourse, the reconstructive and idealised strategy is to point out the real possibility if those obstacles were removed. And removed they will slowly but surely be, because of the imperfect but real democratic discourse that will convince everyone involved that such removal is to the best for all.

The notion of identity politics in the 1980s served as a position from which Rawls' and Habermas' projection of public justification was criticised, in its demand for rights and justice for particular identities. However, the emphasis on identity politics relatively soon waned since it became increasingly clear that such politics, pursued with consequence, would support intolerant, right-wing, racist or Islamist movements. The appearance of extreme phenomena rather demonstrated the need for a unifying concept of public reason and a notion of democracy that could include such groups within a larger democratic framework. In the political theoretical discourse in the 1990s, the deliberative approach, particularly its moderate and empirically inclined versions, convincingly demonstrated its relevance vis-à-vis identity politics, on the background of both theoretical insights, and political events in Europe and elsewhere.

Still, two main problems with the deliberalist approaches concern us here. First, deliberative politics is grounded on a counterfactual normative theory and socio-logical observations. There has been an attempt to combine these two scholarly traditions into a unified framework (J. Cohen in Benhabib 1996, 188). Second, there has been tension between the universalising norms associated with the idea of publicness (openness, equality of access, participatory parity), and the
acknowledgement of difference. Habermas and others have slightly revised their notion of a public sphere in the direction of differentiation and diversity, seeing them as located at different but related communicative levels or layers of formality. The deliberative approach followed Jean Cohen’s recommendation: ‘it is not enough to insist on the plurality of publics (Benhabib), without noticing the possible and desirable plurality of its types. While the latter problem has been dealt with by Habermas by de-idealising the notion of the public sphere, the first problem poses a serious challenge. Discourse ethics has simply turned out to be too risky a boat to sail away on for such a powerful approach to democracy as the deliberative notion of politics.

In response, notions of a more conflict-oriented politics and a more participative, culturally diverse public sphere have been proposed by Nancy Fraser, Iris Young, Chantal Mouffe, Sheldon Wolin, Jodi Dean, William Conolly and Bonnie Honig. This chapter briefly presents the contestation approach generally and what it claims about the functioning of the public sphere and then even more specifically about the use of Internet-based media, as media for public debate. I argue that it tends to serve well as opposition to the deliberation-approach as far as it goes, but also that its conception of the public sphere is immature and lacks a concept of political control. While it seems to be highly concerned with the emancipatory aspects of pluralism, it does not address the challenging aspects of struggle and conflict. It never developed a theory of the public sphere as such, with or without the new digital media.

CONTESTATION

In general, conflict-oriented approaches to democratic discourse argue that legitimacy is neither produced through fair aggregation of particular interests, nor through open and rational deliberation yielding optimal solutions for all (Conolly 1991; Mouffe 2000; Tully 1999; 2000, 2002; Wolin 1996). Rather public meaning-formation is created through political contests and conflicts involving moral as well as instrumental interests. The purpose of public debate is not the visualisation of particular interests or the realisation or approximation of a rational consensus, but success or victory for the cause or issue. Politics is a contest or ongoing controversy where the aim is to win (Hayward 2009, 125). As Hayward holds, the contestation view makes this fact into a normative idea. Politics ought to involve contests over principles and norms. It is not only a question of struggling for instrumental resources, but also of winning support for certain norms
and principles. Politics is a struggle among different interpretations of morality and justice.

The contestation approach views political interests as products of particular constellations of norms and values, belonging to particular groups. Consensus or compromise with other interests is not necessarily seen as favourable, since those other interests may represent narrow privileges reserved for a powerful minority. This normative perspective emphasises the interests and the rights of the less privileged, and their possession of democratic value even if not rationally presented. Debate concerns real conflicts over resources, which means that some may have to lose the battle. The question is whether political interests promote or inhibit free and equal struggles over collective norms and principles on what is just and fair. This perspective takes into account that power in Western societies is hierarchically distributed and that social inequalities mostly are of a structural kind. Disadvantaged groups then have little option other than to forcefully promote their norms and moral principles contra other norms, in order to undermine oppressive hierarchies and destabilise the status quo. The political system is often seen as lacking legitimacy at the outset because of structural inequalities and exclusion policies. From this perspective, legitimacy is produced when established politics stand the test of being subjected to attempts at changing the rules of the game, occasionally through unconventional means (demonstrations, civil disobedience, even riots in the suburbs, etc.) and enter into peaceful dialogue with challenging organised interests. Legitimacy is generated when political institutions see the value of political contest, rather than as a threat, because it represents a capacity to acknowledge power relations.

The contestation approach is confronted with versions of the liberal dilemma, toward which it must try to develop strategies. In political theory, the task is more generally seen as developing an understanding of politics that depart from deliberative approaches, and yet remain democratic in some sense of the word. Within this approach, theoretical inspiration is drawn from a quite diverse collection of thinkers, such as Antonio Gramsci, Carl Schmitt and Ludvig Wittgenstein. A normative background is found in Hannah Arendt’s claim that political freedom is anchored in a collective capability to participate in struggles and to change political norms through such dynamic processes.

CONFLICT AS NORM

What is called the agonistic model, contestation politics, etc. in political theory argues that conflict and expressed diversities are an unavoidable dimension of pol-
itics and may contribute productively to democratic politics. In this perspective, debate is not separated from cultural and religious life, morality from ethics, or public from private. Rather democratic discussion is embedded in diversity and differences of many sorts. Conflict, therefore, is an inherent aspect of democracy – democracy is contestation over controversial ethical questions. A form of legitimacy may emerge from a general sense of open contestation. But also, no deliberation may result in a completely legitimate decision. Democracy cannot be justified through rational discussion with consensus as a normative goal. In a sense, democracy is a system for suspending, delaying and neutralising conflict.

Whereas the approach is incompatible with Rawls’ and Habermas’ versions of discursive democracy, it can possibly be combined with, or find its place within some of the weak versions of the deliberative approach. Deliberative debates can then be seen as a way to keep conflicts on an acceptable level. The main threat for democracy is not conflict but oppression, apathy, isolation and aimless violence. That is what one can realistically settle for in a culturally diverse, class-divided society.

To Sheldon Wolin (1994), politics is the legitimised and public contestation, primarily by organised and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the collective (Wolin 1994, 11). As Wolin states: ‘The democratization of “advanced industrial democracies” comes down to this: The labor, wealth and psyches of the citizenry are simultaneously defended and exploited, protected and extracted, nurtured and fleeced, rewarded and commanded, flattered and threatened’ (Wolin 1994, 16). The election is a ritual that tends to reinforce the idea that the people have continuing influence on government policy. The mythical connection between voting and government between elections is reinforced by political commentary and civil campaigns that deal with the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, in the shape of position and opposition. Meanwhile the government gets its policies sanctioned by parliament on a wide variety of political areas.

A discussion-based notion of democracy needs, according to this approach, to include other forms of expression than what normally counts as argumentation. As Iris Marion Young observes, ‘Deliberative theorists tend to assume that bracketing political and economic power is sufficient to make speakers equal. The assumption fails to notice that the social power that can prevent people from being equal speakers derives not only from economic dependence or political domination but also from an internalized sense of the right one has to speak or not speak, and from the devaluation of some people’s style of speech and the elevation of others’ (Young in Benhabib 1996, 122). Young argues that as long as cultural differences
and different social positions prevail, people’s different status will differ in deliberation.

In Young’s view, ‘differences of social position and identity perspective function as a resource for public reason rather than as divisions that public reasons transcend’ (Young in Benhabib 1996, 127). Young also recognises, however, that a community needs to be based on a minimal unity of mutual respect, freedom to speak one’s points of view and a basic agreement on some procedural rules of fair discussion and decision-making (Young in Benhabib 1996, 126). In this sense, Young argues both as an aggregative and a deliberative theorist. What she adds is social conflict as something to be included in discourse rather than rationally sorted by it. We should note here that the deliberative approach does not exclude particular demands and confrontational styles. Rather they have the right to prove their plausibility in public debate, and even if their views are not accepted, they will have participated in the process.

Young proposes three elements that a conception of communicative democracy requires in addition to critical argument: First, what she calls greeting, which refers to mutual acknowledgement as it is practiced in everyday pragmatic interaction, and includes more than simply being receptive to the other’s arguments. Second, rhetoric refers precisely to passionate, emotional, seductive styles of expression. And third storytelling is the principle that interests of groups are expressed not only through arguments but through ‘thicker’ and narrative forms of expression that enable one to understand the other’s situation, to evoke sympathy and solidarity beyond mere arguments. The three additional forms of communication in public reasoning suggest an approach of communicative democracy that includes more than the deliberative approach, in that it recognises a broader spectrum of expressive and formulation styles.

Other feminists, like Jane Monika Drexler (2007) have criticised Young for accepting Habermas’ notion of the public sphere and mutual understanding as the key element of democratic practice. Although Young emphasised rhetorical and non-argumentative forms of expression, such expression can only be met with understanding and support if it is accepted as reasonable. To be able to participate in public communication about societal matters, even disorderly and contestatory action wants to be taken seriously, and must adhere to some common rules of communication. Drexler comments that Young in fact ends up in a moderate version of the deliberative approach. From her critique of Young, Drexler argues that, with the 1999 protests against the WTO conference in Seattle and a feminist civil disobedience campaign at the same place in 2001 in mind, that such actions are not political in a deliberalist sense and yet were clearly political. Drexler argues with
references to Arendt that such political action marks the unification of freedom and action into a virtuous political action, where the significance lies in the action itself more than in the message. Drexler, along with Dana Villa, emphasises the nature of action itself with the realisation that ‘the action is the message’. Hannah Arendt’s critique of the moral interpretation of action as rule-following action is here carried into an argument for oppositional performative action that breaks with the reasonable argument.

Following Drexler, the challenge for politics is to resist hegemonic, moral frameworks from which public communication is included and excluded. However, the dilemma of means of participation is inescapable and has always been so. Drexler shows how Young ‘ultimately retains the conceptual framework of Habermasian communicative ethics, even while she is specifically critical of how he himself worked with his terms of debate’ (Drexler 2007, 6). Drexler and other feminists locate themselves in the exact same position. At the end of the day, Drexler too must value inclusion and recognition, but also the need of democracy to go further in the exploration of action that pursues conflict publicly.

Few would disagree. European liberal democracy has since the Second World War been forced to reflect on, and in part accept disruptive forms of political action such as political strikes, blocking of roads and railways, occupation of headquarters, human shields, hunger strikes and other forms of civil disobedience as political communication to which all parts of the conflict must take a position.

Most of these actions, often done in order to stop what has been seen as a destructive process, have been considered desperate and yet rational. The main reason is that such ‘symbolic’ action always is both non-argumentative and rhetorical; the circumstances and the intense debates surrounding the case and the events communicate a means–end rationality. The actionists argue for the necessity, relevance and proportionality of their action, and reply to others’ critique and condemnation. They want inclusion, and that is why, I may add, they tend to be routinised into conventional politics. Prior to that stage, however, such action has often been judged as moral and socially valuable by history, both the argument and the performance. The performative dimension is the most visible, and often met with condemnation and physical force. It is normally enacted in order to generate more attention than support. To be sure, in recent years, we have seen riots and upheavals in Paris, London and other European cities, even Stockholm; where physical damage to third party property left even liberal politicians in disarray: How to explain such rage? What takes place is a test of democracy by challenging its tolerance. Such ‘improper’ action also makes evident what we all know; democracy is not a given, but contingent and reproduced only by ourselves.
AGONISTIC DEMOCRACY

A more elaborate version of the contestation approach is presented by Chantal Mouffe (2005), who argues that liberal democracy is a product of incompatibility between democracy and liberalism. These are the logics or ‘grammars’ of equality and liberty, which cannot be reconciled, and which have been a driving force in modern history. The two forces can only temporarily be stabilised through pragmatic political forces such as the social-democratic movement. Although hegemonic neo-liberalist politics represent a threat to democratic achievements, to Mouffe the deliberative approach, which she seems to relate to European social-democratic politics, is no alternative. On the tension between democracy and liberalism, Mouffe states, ‘Liberal-democratic politics consists in fact, in the constant process of negotiation and renegotiation – through different hegemonic articulations – of this constitutive paradox’ (Mouffe 2005, 45). Mouffe avoids, however, the recognition that even socialist democracy, after 1989, can only be a version of liberal democracy. Socialist politics therefore is doomed to confront the very same dilemmas as are confronting liberalist (including social-democratic) politics.

Mouffe does not present an alternative to liberal democracy, nor does she present a critique of social democratic politics. Mouffe argues that the deliberative approach misses the specificity of the political, by replacing Schumpeter’s economic model with a Kantian moral one. The Political, according to both Carl Schmitt and Mouffe, is neither about self-interests nor moral obligations. As a logical consequence of the combination of democratic politics and a capitalist economy, democracy is about collectives, classes and conflicting interests. Mouffe underlines and extends the previous argument about social conflict – agonistic confrontation – as productive to democracy. Somewhat surprisingly, Mouffe draws on Schmitt’s argument about the inconsistency and failure of liberal democracy and the tendency of basing collective identities on us/them distinctions. According to Schmitt, parliamentary politics was not the way to go. The revival of Carl Schmitt has thus reached even socialist writers, in spite of Schmitt’s scandalous position in the Third Reich, and even though many of his points had already been addressed by Max Weber within a liberal (if realist) framework. When Schmitt denounces liberal democracy, it is because his definition of democracy is too ambitious: it consists of the identity between ruler and the ruled, the fundamental unity between the general will and those who execute it. This plebiscite or populist view, no modern democracy can or wants to realise in full. As Mouffe acknowledges, modern democracy implies a ‘closure’, in the form of representation, deliberation, leadership, tradition, etc.
Mouffe thinks that the search for a principle of legitimacy grounded on rationality is flawed because the diversity of views is both positive and unavoidable. If the aim is to reduce antagonistic relations, another approach is to acknowledge agonistic conflict. Following Mouffe, ‘agonism’ is a relation not between enemies but between ‘adversaries’ or ‘friendly enemies’. While they disagree on how to organize society, they ‘share a common symbolic space’ (Mouffe 2005, 13).

This seems to be a fairly accurate description of positions that confront one another in the contemporary public sphere. In questions related to the social crisis in the wake of the financial crisis in Europe from 2011, and the disruptions that followed the migration crisis from 2015, it seems to capture very important dimensions of the European political climate. That most political theorists fail to see alternatives to liberal democracy does not imply that they see the relation between democracy and liberalism as harmonic and unproblematic. It doesn’t take a Carl Schmitt to see the fundamental dilemmas between a society’s wish for social and economic equality, and its equally strong belief in individual freedom and autonomy, or the collateral damages done by liberalist policy under the slogan of ‘free flow’ and a single market. Liberal democracy is a fundamental compromise, an imperfect and disharmonic constellation, ‘doomed’ to perpetual self-change and corresponding changes in legitimacy strategies. The tension between democratic politics and economic liberalism, cannot be resolved by turning markets into democratic distribution networks (planning economy), or by transforming political democracy into an interest-based marketplace of votes and opinions’ (Schumpeter, Chicago school). Schumpeter’s work *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (1947) was along with Down’s (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy* the first steps from normative political theory to a descriptive theory via market theories that seemed to eloquently describe how a pluralism of self-interests and values was what politics could be based on in a modern mass democracy that needed to achieve stability. Compromise was what politics realistically could achieve in place of an unrealistic or non-existing common good. The turn to descriptive theory of politics thus turned to instrumentalism.

History provides ample evidence of how politics has developed its logic and forms of power and we are left with the complex question of how to handle the dynamic contradiction between political and other forms of autonomy, such as economic. Political disagreement is basically about alternative conceptions of justice that stem from precisely such attempts.

Seen from a contestation or agonistic position, the deliberative approach ignores that liberal democracy is unable to constitute favourable conditions in which deliberation can succeed. Attempts at deliberation will transform into conflict. What Iris
Marion Young calls ‘communicative democracy’ acknowledges that public debate may be agonistic and competitive: ‘Parties aim to win the argument, not to achieve mutual understanding. Consenting because of the “force of the better argument” means being unable to think of further counterarguments, to that is, to concede defeat. The agonistic norms of deliberation reveal ways that power re-enters this arena, even though deliberative theorists may claim to have bracketed it’ (Young in Benhabib, p. 123). For her part, Chantal Mouffe concludes: ‘Consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations. The frontier that it establishes between what is and what is not legitimate is a political one, and for that reason it should remain contestable’ (Mouffe 2005, 49). According to Mouffe, democracy will always be based on contingent, temporary and hegemonic inclusion–exclusion mechanisms, which the deliberative approach tends to reduce into one of few possible forms of identification. The deliberative approach does not confront, Mouffe argues, Schmitt’s claim that all democracy is based in inclusion–exclusion.

Mouffe claims that deliberative theories like those developed by Rawls and Habermas cannot refute claims about the impossibility of impartial procedures and of consensus without common identity. She seems to accept Schmitt’s argument that true liberal legitimacy can only emerge in relatively homogeneous political communities, and is thus unachievable in modern pluralist democracies. In contrast to Schmitt, Mouffe argues that there is another way to constitute a demos; by accepting not only pluralism, but the facts of social division and inequality as constitutive for democracy, forces which negate unity and normative convergence. What Mouffe advocates is a form of thin ‘commonality’, sufficient to institute a demos but compatible with various forms of pluralism (Mouffe 2005, 55).

Mouffe quite wisely understands liberal democracy as the recognition of the constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications: ‘Hence the importance of leaving this space of contestation forever open, instead of trying to fill it through the establishment of a supposedly “rational” consensus’ (Mouffe 2005, 56). There cannot be one legitimate answer to the question of what is a just political order. Mouffe therefore claims that political theorists have been barking up the wrong tree; they have searched for universal validity and truth rather than for the actual practices and pragmatic moves aiming at persuading people. The issue, Mouffe argues, ‘is not to find arguments to justify the rationality or universality of liberal democracy that would be acceptable by every rational and reasonable person. Liberal democratic principles can only be defended as being constitutive of our form of life, and we should not try to ground our commitment to them on something supposedly safer’ (Mouffe 2005, 66).
Mouffe does not criticise political liberalism for its normativity. Mouffe herself aims at contributing to normative political theory. Her point is not only that conflict cannot be eliminated, but also that alterity carries with it a promise of autonomy. She is concerned with the oppressive aspects of ‘homogenizing universalism’. Conflict keeps the aim of a peaceful democracy alive supplying it with the notion that contestation is not only a part of, but also celebrates democracy. It protects pluralist democracy against all attempts of closure. It views the public sphere as a sphere of contestation, power in an unending process where no final destination is possible and for the best of democracy. Conflict and confrontation indicate that democracy ‘is alive and inhabited by pluralism’ (Mouffe 2005, 55).

‘NEODEMOCRATIC POLITICS’

Similarly to Chantal Mouffe, Jodi Dean (2003), argues that an alternative way to think of publics, is to address what she calls neodemocracies, which are configured on contestation and conflict: ‘They reject the fantasy of a public and instead work from the antagonisms that animate political life’ (Dean 2003, 108). Rather than being centred on political programs and visions, neodemocratic politics concentrates on issues where ‘issue networks’ emerge and demonstrate the credibility of the stakeholders. Whereas the idea of the public covers up the fundamental cleavages and conflicts in politics, neodemocratic networks are contestatory and engaged around issues of conflict. Thus rather than inclusion, the weight is on interests and engagements: ‘What does matter is commitment and engagement by people and organizations networked around contested issues’ (Dean 2003, 109). Therefore all views cannot be seen as of equal value. Views are claims on behalf of objective interests, and politics is about winning and losing battles between such interests. Neodemocratic politics are struggles for hegemony: ‘They are partisan, fought for the sake of people’s most fundamental beliefs, identities and practices.’ Decisiveness is more important than time-consuming deliberation and the collecting of more information (Dean 2003, 110). Dean goes far in rejecting openness and transparency as values, and argues that this follows from the critiques of publicity as ideology.

For her part, Chantal Mouffe believes that democratic clashes between different political principles and positions are good for democracy, as this may prevent other forms of confrontation. Too much emphasis on consensus leads to apathy and to ‘collective passions around issues which cannot be managed by the democratic process and an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of
civility’ (Mouffe 2005, 104). Mouffe points out that as society loses its ability to handle problems in a political way, as a consequence of the blurring of the left/right divide, law takes over and a depolitization takes place. With the hegemony of a judicial discourse, less is left for the political arena. To Mouffe the left/right distinction reflects a genuine conflict-oriented dimension, institutionalised through the party system, which legitimates conflict. Without political confrontation in the public space, antagonism accumulates in other corners of society. The celebration of agreement as an ideal for a pluralist society only prevents its realisation in the public sphere, Mouffe argues. ‘What we need today is some form of “post-social-democratic politics”, on condition that this does not mean regressing behind social democracy to some pre-social-democratic liberal view type of democracy’ (Mouffe 2005, 123). To Mouffe, politics is not a moral dimension. Rather it is about ethics, but then an ethics that cannot eliminate conflict, but rather creates it. Rightly, Mouffe points out that politics is characterised by contingency (undecideability) and instability. Politisation lives on after the decision because every decision creates conflict.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET

From a contestation point of view, two main perspectives on the Internet have been presented. One view disregards the Internet either as a vehicle for a public sphere or for political interaction in general. The new media present themselves to a democratic public, but they yield not democracy but communicative capitalism. Any use of these media would only confirm the Internet as an infrastructure for financial markets and global capital. The impasse is that ‘the technologies that materialize a promise of full political access and inclusion drive an economic formation whose brutalities render democracy worthless for the majority of people’ (Dean 2003, 102-03). The practical recommendation from this point of view would be – if possible – to rely on other media than the Internet for political mobilisation. As the Internet has become omnipresent, however, this has not proved a sustainable strategy. In totalitarian societies, the Internet is an indispensable tool for oppression.

Another perspective on the Internet, therefore, lies implicit in the political writings of Mouffe and others. Needless to say, political engagement on the Internet is often motivated by emotions and personal engagement. The way people are energised through a wide variety of genres and media on the Internet draws on imagination, storytelling and other patos-related forms of expression. Zizi
Papacharissi (2015) calls this simply ‘affective publics’. The net is seen as a vehicle and battlefield for personal expression, identity politics and social struggle. In this view, the Internet is precisely an infrastructure, and as relatively neutral as infrastructures like roads, railways, air networks tend to be. Due to its history, the Internet is in fact more egalitarian, open and politically uncontrollable and decoupled than most infrastructures. If this is not an argument for its suitability as a basis for a political public sphere, it points towards its applicability as a tool in the struggle for rights and equality, for recognition, and against the destructive forces of communicative and other kinds of capitalism. As a medium for protest against injustice, the Internet presents itself as a free and open, accessible, widespread and adaptive medium. If dominated by communication capitalism, it has also opened itself, from its inception in the 1960s, to alternative media and use.

The question of what expectations society ought to direct to public debate and manifestations can be answered precisely from this view on the Internet. When political mobilisation and protest, as we have seen in so many countries and cities from Cairo to Istanbul to Kiev to Paris, is open and inclusive in its form, and when the preparation and mobilisation takes place in and through open Internet media, the legitimacy question largely dissolves. The legitimacy of political protest requires that the social processes and movements that lead up to street marches or upheavals remain open and permeable to contributions, arguments and critiques from all sides. We see similarities to the deliberative view on legitimacy: As long as the process is open, it is legitimate. The decisive difference, of course, is that in the contestation approach, the public expression process may be far from deliberative. The deliberative stage, one may say, has been surpassed, and the time for challenging hegemony has begun. Encryption and decryption of communication may be essential. Such issues are controversial precisely because they create obstacles for state surveillance and monitoring of communication as a counter-terrorism measure.

Democracy cannot fundamentally change the economic and social inequality which democracy itself has made possible, and which can only be eliminated by breaking its own rules. Even in democratic societies, some groups see no other way but to turn to the streets, as in the riots of Paris, London or Madrid and Athens. As a superstructure for capitalism, liberal democracy legitimises that capitalism, and simultaneously makes it habitable for a large portion of the world’s population. Socialists therefore, have the choice of either being non-liberal and quite possibly non-democratic, or to joining the administrative social democracy. Tied to a liberalism and global capitalism, democracy cannot give in to protests that demand fundamental changes, but it can grant these groups and interests a voice
in democracy by admitting that democracy cannot be only about deliberation but also about antagonism. The contestation approach unintentionally suggests that governments and parliaments may view protest as a test of their own policies. Unfortunately, few governments have been able to see it that way.

CONCLUSION

As we saw in chapter two, affirmative ‘foundationalist’ approaches seek something that can serve as a moral standard external to our practices, whether it is morality, rationality, human nature; something that can be studied independently of what we are doing. Foundations are not idealisations or appeals, they are rather descriptions of our practices according to an external reference. Foundations tend to be part of those practices, and thus to function ideologically. As Rorty argues: ‘To say that a certain course of conduct is more in accord with human nature or our moral sense, or more rational, than another is just a fancy way of commending our own utopian vision of our community’ (Rorty in Benhabib 1996, 334). The distilling of reason and the doing away of emotivism and passion seems itself to be on shaky grounds. Rorty’s preferred solution would be to replace the external standard for a view on language as a ‘tool for breaking down people’s distrust of one another rather than as one for representing how things really are’ (Rorty in Benhabib 1996, 33). For the contestation approach, democracy is interpreted as split between movements and interests that are involved in conflict. Neodemocratic politics is not based upon procedures but on a variety of political tools and tactics that may open up for opportunities for contestation, and challenge hegemonical forces. The norms that are emphasised, according to Dean, are not the Enlightenment norms of inclusion, openness and rationality, but rather duration, hegemony, decisiveness and credibility. This kind of politics thinks in terms of tactics, which means that means and tools for protest are embedded in the already existing power relations. And yet, the contestation approach would not at the outset reject the possibility of at least modest trust-building through language as a tool.
Chapter 4
The reconstructive approach on the public sphere and the Internet

In his classic treatise on the emerging public sphere in Europe, Jürgen Habermas uncovered new social norms of public communication and reasoning in the new middle class social settings and associations of early 1800s Europe. Jodi Dean (2003) concisely sums them up: disregard for social status, social equality and equal access (anti-hierarchical); new social areas were opened for critical debate (unrestricted agenda); all weight was on the quality of the argument (uncoerced communication); a culture for questioning; and critique about common concerns, open access and inclusivity. Generally, a notion of rationality as reasoning, transparency and inclusivity seems to have permeated the public sites like the British coffee houses, French Salons and German Tischgesellschaften. This form of public communication constitutes a space or a sphere in the sense that the norms were shared by all participants. In principle, they were universal and in principle, could be applied by all. Any vocal rejection of them would only confirm their existence.

In practice, the norms excluded most women and the working class, but the self-identity of the public sphere was nevertheless that of rationality, equality and openness.

Among the critics of the English translation of The Structural Transformation was Nancy Fraser (in Calhoun (1993)), who then provided a comment that was more sociological than normative. Are all citizens invited to take part in the public sphere as members of the public, and can they all participate on equal terms? Is it really possible for members of the public sphere to bracket systematic class and status differences and discuss matters of common interest as if they are all equals? If not, is it then probable that the public opinion will come across as legitimate? What Fraser (2007, 81–82) calls the legitimacy critique argued that Habermas’ pioneering study ‘obscured the existence of systemic obstacles that deprive some who are nominally members of the public of the capacity to participate on a par with others, as full partners in public debate.’ Fraser’s point in 1993 was that Habermas focused on the bourgeois public sphere and therefore ignored non-lib-
eral, non-bourgeois, competing publics that without doubt existed and still exist in a conflictual relationship with the construction of consent in the dominant public sphere (Fraser in Calhoun 1993). Fraser’s conclusion was then that the public sphere should have been recognised as being more differentiated.

In pointing out sociological and historical facts about class divides and status hierarchies in civil society, this form of critique questioned the legitimacy of public opinion in democratic theory as well as in social reality. Fraser criticised the liberal public sphere model in *The Structural Transformation* for not taking the social conditions in the real world into consideration. In this chapter, I present and discuss Habermas’ more recent ideas about the contemporary public sphere and related ideas about ‘publics’ and political communication. I also address Habermas’ brief comments on the Internet, and try to extrapolate some thoughts on the digital wave from his more general ideas.

**THE MODERN PRINCIPLE OF PUBLICITY**

From the early nineteenth century on, it was quite clear what the public sphere required to thrive and develop: freedom of the press and expression, social settings, and media for debate and sharing of information. This empirical development had its theoretical parallel in liberal theory. In the traditions from Rousseau, Kant, John Stuart Mill and John Dewey, it is accepted that only a *principle of publicity* protected by law and connected to an independent and informed public opinion and independent parties can fully exhaust what lies in the concept of popular sovereignty. The importance and emphasis of publicity led to legally protected, open discursive public spaces, from informal political discussion at the pub and in the local newspaper, to formal will formation in political associations. In spite of commercialisation and concentration of newspapers and subsequently broadcasting, the public sphere has manifested itself as a multitude of more or less informal arenas, media, genres and networks, by which ideas and debate circulate throughout society and upwards to more formal bodies of political deliberation and decision (Habermas 1996, 184). Democratic politics today implies more than elections and corporate negotiations: Parliamentary processes rely on ‘the context of discovery provided by a procedurally unregulated public sphere that is borne by the general public of citizens’ (Habermas 1996, 307).

Habermas projects a process of gradual formalisation: The informal will-formation in the public sphere generates ‘influence’, which is transformed into ‘communicative power’ through elections and further into ‘administrative power’ through
legislation. ‘The public opinion that is worked up via democratic procedures into communicative power cannot ‘rule’ of itself, but can only point the use of administrative power in specific directions’ (Habermas in Benhabib 1996, 29). Habermas’s discourse theory relies on the ‘procedures and communicative presuppositions of democratic opinion- and will-formation function as the most important sources for the discursive rationalization of the decisions of an administration constrained by law and statute. Rationalisation means more than mere legitimation but less than the constitution of political power’ (Habermas in Benhabib 1996, 28). This understanding of democracy suggests a new balance of the three resources of money, administrative power and solidarity, from which modern societies, according to Habermas, meet their needs for integration. The normative implications are obvious: ‘The integrative force of “solidarity”, which can no longer be drawn solely from sources of communicative action, should develop through widely expanded and differentiated public spheres as well as through legally institutionalized procedures of democratic deliberation and decision-making. It should gain the strength to hold its own against the two other mechanisms of social (?) integration – money and administrative power’ (Habermas in Benhabib 1996, 28).

The public sphere provides a distinction between the public and the private, as well as between the notion of an ethically unified society, and rational rule. In this sense, it presents a culturally and historically specific solution on the problem of democracy. The distinctions also bring together dimensions from both sides. The private dimension informs the public and keeps what is not suitable for deliberation such as religious convictions. Moral norms on the other hand, are discussed and generated in rational discourse, and unify individuals into a collective. The underlying expectation of a rational discursive treatment of important question for all provides a regulative idea from which actual cases can be evaluated. In this way, the notion of the public sphere distinguishes (and brings together) classical ideas of democracy and the modern mass society saturated by media. The history of modern media therefore is also the history of a dimension of a public sphere of growing importance.

Several disciplines have examined public debates, journalism and other media output in light of such a view. It is assumed that what can be considered as the best solution to moral-political questions can only be generated from the rationality in open deliberation. The public sphere is the place or mechanism where a geographically defined democracy reflects on itself, ‘in which societal conflicts are addressed, legitimacy is generated, and those in power are held to account’ (Salvatore et al. 2013, p. 2). The public sphere translates public opinion into material
for political decisions. The public sphere is seen as comprised by networks of ‘sensors’ that respond to pressure and stimulate opinion-making. It nurtures itself from lifeworld values like socialisation, culture and civil society engagement. The public sphere is seen as a diversity of associations, movements, institutions and organisations in and outside of the civil society, operating on a long list of agendas and with a variety of styles. By contrasting theory and practice, ideals and reality, research has found a platform for critical enquiry. A vital research question concerning the vitality of democracy then is: What are the thresholds and obstacles for relevant insight and open and reasonable debates on public issues? The theoretical and empirical importance of the concept of the public sphere for questions of political legitimacy is therefore evident. In between and in relation to general elections, the public sphere is the locus of legitimising and delegitimising discourses.

The reasons to ensure an inclusive public sphere are many: Giving equal access to cultural resources and opportunities for communication and organisation, providing media resources to marginalised groups, encouraging the media to include dissenting voices, requiring representatives to run regular deliberative exercises in their constituencies, experimentation with deliberative polling, measures against media concentration and many others (See McBride 2005). From the deliberative approach, these measures are regarded as steps towards democratisation. The differentiation of the public sphere complicates its function as a supplier of relevant topics for the decision-making level, but it is more receptive for various needs and interests in society.

The traditional public sphere gradually developed a more inclusive and egalitarian profile. The concept of ‘democratisation’ can be used here in a descriptive sense. As public discourse has become more inclusive and intense because of expansion and fragmentation of a wide range of media and communication networks, the structure of the public sphere has been further transformed.

It is important for Habermas that the public sphere may even appear as a social institution in that it is independent and robustly structured in a way that makes it impossible to manipulate or bribe it with power and money. It is self-reproduced (Habermas 1996, 364). In spite of the majority’s seemingly passive role, actors on the stages of the public sphere must appear credible to the lay public, and cannot simply ignore private experiences and demands of the citizenry.

In contrast to the conventional liberal model, debate and deliberation in the circulation of public opinions are regarded as vital in that they ‘[exert] a rationalising pressure towards improving the quality of the decision’ (Habermas 2009,143). The model is more concerned with quality than with aggregates. ‘The deliberative
model conceives of the public sphere as a sounding board for registering problems which affect society as a whole, and at the same time as a discursive filterbed which sifts interest-generalising and informative contributions to relevant topics out of the unregulated processes of opinion-formation, broadcasts these “public opinions” back onto the dispersed public of citizens, and puts them on the formal agendas of the responsible bodies’ (Habermas 2009, 143). The discursive (communicative) rationalisation that takes place in the public sphere implies that politics is legitimised but also improved through the cooperative discourses. The rationalising power of the public sphere as ‘influence,’ encompasses formation of more or less justified opinions, not to the decisions themselves.

The opinion formation in democratic societies is seen by Habermas as independent from, but connected to, formal decision-making bodies and ‘is effected in an open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal social and substantive boundaries’ (Habermas 1996, 307). It is mediated by the mass media and flows through different publics and forms what Habermas calls an anarchic structure and a ‘wild’ complex that resists organisation. (Therefore, we may add, it is very difficult to examine empirically.) To be sure, public discourse is vulnerable to political pressure from above and easily affected by distorted communication in the media. But more importantly, from a discursive point of view, it possesses a ‘medium’ of unrestricted communication where new problems can be formulated and collective understandings of the world can be constructed (Habermas 1996, 310). Public discourses possess little or no formal power, but they can articulate interpretations and general interests with limitations and compulsions, especially on the Internet. What the American sociologist Talcott Parsons called influence becomes an object of controversy among interest groups and NGOs and leading figures in academic life and arts and popular culture, but must resonate in a wider public (Habermas 1996, 364). Political influence is supported by public opinion and converted into political power when it affects the decisions of authorised members of the political system. In itself, the public sphere is relieved from the burden of decision-making (Habermas 1996, 362).

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE

How are we to describe this abstract space? Habermas calls the current political public sphere a ‘sounding board’ for problems that must be solved by the political system, and a ‘warning system’ with sensors that are unspecialised but still sensi-
tive throughout society (Habermas 1996, 359). It not only identifies problems but also addresses possible solutions, even dramatises them journalistically in such a way that they are picked up by formal politics. This is typically the task of ad hoc groups in civil society (the social basis of the public sphere) and journalism in concert. The political public sphere is also described as a network for communicating information and points of view: ‘the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions’ (Habermas 1996, 360). Concretely, we speak of fora, stages, arenas, performances and presentations that make up transitory publics, normally based on face-to-face encounters, but generalised and intellectualised to reach larger audiences (Habermas 1996, 361). The public sphere is a ‘communication structure that refers neither to the function nor to the contents of everyday communication but to the social space generated in communicative action’ (Habermas 1996, 360).

The democratic authority of the public sphere is anchored in the notion of deliberative politics, politics as reasoning about the most fair and just solutions. Habermas argues that ‘the formation of political will is channelled through the filter of discursive opinion formation’ (Habermas 2009, 146). This reconstruction presents, according to Habermas an independent, normative standard of how things should work, but it is not taken out of thin air. The theory of communicative action and rationality, he argues, reflects what is actually happening in everyday language. Whether political communication follows the norm of rational discourse can only be tested in empirical research (Habermas 2009, 149).

What Habermas calls ‘epistemic proceduralism’ constitutes a third and more sophisticated methodological view of conditions for democratic process than that offered by methodological individualism (rational choice), and the hermeneutics of ‘republican’ and communitarian perspectives. Habermas argues that there is a cognitive potential in discursive processes that neither rational choice nor hermeneutics can account for. The ‘epistemic’ implies that processes of rationalisation in public discourse may generate new and improved knowledge. The cognitive or epistemic dimension satisfies conditions of a functional division of labour between arenas or publics that enables society to enhance discursive processes of opinion and will formation. This counts as more than utopianism, Habermas argues, since (according to the theory of communicative action) normative validity claims inherent in actual argumentation may enable mutual understanding and cooperation (Habermas 2009, 146). Such validity claims assume that what is said is true or right or truthful and can be justified. Contrary to centrifugal systemic powers, they tend to encourage convergence of views.
The public sphere in contemporary advanced societies is heterogeneous and complex. It consists of episodic publics in pubs and cafés, of occasional arranged publics like presentations and theatre performances or church meetings and of abstract publics of readers, and audiences of the mass media. Still, we may talk about one public sphere:

‘Despite these manifold differentiations, however, all the partial publics constituted by ordinary language remain porous to one another. The one text of “the” public sphere, a text continually extrapolated and extending radically in all directions, is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context: yet one can always build hermeneutical bridges from one text to the next. Segmented public spheres are constituted with the help of exclusion mechanisms; however, because publics cannot harden into organizations or systems, there is no exclusion rule without a proviso for its abolishment’ (Habermas 1996, 374). Since the public sphere understands itself historically as open and egalitarian, the boundaries are permeable.

For instance, experiences such as those of an African immigrant in Europe may be difficult to bring forward due to cultural and linguistic difficulties. Such experiences may be easier to make public through artistic means, such as a photo exhibition, a collection of poems or rap music. Such cultural and strictly speaking non-discursive expressions may still contribute to a discourse on multicultural society – and may be brought further by others into a more formal debate on legislative changes. Thus one may think of the public sphere spanning from a periphery (for instance the street manifestation) towards a centre (the Parliament debate).

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In nation states, according to Habermas, political communication circulates in and between three levels: (1) institutionalised discourse and deliberation in the centre of the political system, as in parties, parliaments, courts, committees etc.; here political programs, judicial findings, official guidelines, policies and regulations are decided; (2) media-based networks of communication in front of a national audience where public opinion takes shape. The political relevance lies in that opinions are widely published and the central actors (following Peters), in addition to the media professionals, are lobbyists, general interest groups and NGO advocates, experts, moral entrepreneurs who draw attention to neglected problems, and intellectuals who are involved on behalf of general interests. They are
all involved in the production of public opinions, that is: they produce clusters of controversial issues and inputs to which concerned parties attach different weights. They exert influence, and form a milieu to which thoughts and feelings adjust (Habermas 2009, 146,159). (3) The third level is every day, face-to-face communication in civil society in arranged or informal publics, where voters are influenced over time (Habermas 2009, 159).

The public sphere has its centre at the middle level. (Habermas 2009, 164). It is rooted in civil society and forms itself at the periphery of the state. It contributes to political legitimation ‘by producing political communication, by keeping it alive, by steering – and filtering – it. Thus I understand the public sphere as an intermediate system of mass communication, situated between the formally organized deliberations and negotiations at the centre and the arranged or informal conversations which take place in civil society at the periphery of the political system’ (Habermas 2009, 159). The political public sphere is according to Habermas the periphery of the political system; it is a part of it. In that case, the political system legitimises itself. This is a position one expects to find in the ancient demos and in realist approaches, but hardly in Habermas: ‘the centre and the periphery of the political system differ in their respective levels of density of institutions. Whereas the legally binding force of “political power” is attached to offices, the “political influence” of public opinions grows out of a network of criss-crossing flows of communication’ (Habermas 2009, 164).

Voluntary organisations in civil society anchor the communication in the public sphere to lifeworld values of culture and solidarity. They form the organisational substratum of the general public of citizens. (Habermas 1996, 367). They are perhaps not the most conspicuous element of the public sphere, compared to multinational media corporations, opinion research, public relations and political parties. Nevertheless, they represent citizens’ interests and seek influence on the public agenda, and they do so backed by rights. Under certain circumstances, civil society can acquire influence in the public sphere with decisive effect on parliamentary processes, in spite of the ‘power-ridden mass media-dominated public spheres of Western democracies’ (Habermas 1996, 373). The voices of civil society are likely to be heard when the political system itself experiences indecision or weakness as in times of crisis or when the government has gone too far in its uses of power. However, according to Habermas, ‘the image of a commercial media-dominated public sphere pertains only to a public sphere at rest. In periods of mobilisation, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate. The balance of power between civil society and the political system then shifts’ (Habermas 1996, 379).
For Habermas, public discourse, deriving from civil society anchored in life-world experiences, is of a higher discursive quality than communication instigated from commercial media, parties, public-relation agencies and public opinion bureaus. They are indispensable in that no other source can bring up essential problems facing society. None of the critical topics, like the nuclear arms race, environmental and climate problems, or ethical dilemmas in the wake of genome research, were put forward by political parties, private companies or media organisations. We see how Habermas’ critical perspective remains in his view of the public sphere, as a sphere of both communicative rationality, and polemics of power elites before the public. Whereas the first emerges from civil society, the latter are loaded with power and material resources.

Another intermediate group is the reporters and editors, the Publizisten who exercise heavy editorial power over all the big mass media, including control over the public agendas and how topics are to be framed. In addition, they have taken the role of the intellectual: How we miss the grand performances, Habermas writes, of the great intellectuals like Gunter Grass, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu! Self-ironically, but not without sincerity, Habermas observes that the experts and the professional commentators have taken over from the intellectuals. The press and other mass media dominate the public sphere and need the famous personality of another kind than the post-war intellectual. Now the boundaries between self-promotion and discourse are blurring, and the old intellectual does not feel as welcome. The new TV-personalities and the experts simply do a better job (Habermas, 2009, 54).

Citizens are simultaneously members of society and bearers of a public sphere. In the first capacity, they act through a variety of different roles (clients, tourists, patients, students). The experiences from this part of life are then brought into the public sphere and converted into collective experiences through communication among strangers over great distances, which ipso facto makes it public. What defines the distinction between the private and the public sphere is not the issues or the media themselves but this condition of communication that safeguards the intimacy and the publicity respectively in the two spheres (Habermas 1996, 366). People experience problems in their lifeworld (with unemployment, hospital treatment, etc.), which find expression in the public sphere through individual engagement but more often via the mobilisation of civil society. Competition between political parties yields the hope that politics absorbs the addressed problems, reformulates them as political issues and places them on the political agenda.

Habermas argues that the reality concerning political communication in our society is not at odds with the normative requirements of deliberative politics.
Elites in the public sphere, for example, unavoidably serve two functions: As they attempt to secure their power base, to influence politics with their actions and views, or simply to make a profit, they collectively contribute to the reproduction and the critical vitality of the public sphere. In this sense, the public sphere is a side-effect of individual and organisational attempts to define problems and propose solutions for the political system (Habermas 1996, 370). The interventions of powerful actors do not subvert the idea of a public sphere as long as (1) the media system maintains its independence, and is able to connect both the political centre and civil society in the public sphere, and (2) The civil society empowers citizens to engage in public discourse (Habermas 2009, 173). Then democratic legitimation takes place through inputs that express the variety of the population. By staying away from formal politics, it can comment freely and unconditionally on the actual issues. Habermas argues, ‘Only across the full scope of the process of legitimation can “deliberation” perform the filtering function which justifies the supposition that the process of political will formation fishes the reasonable elements of opinion formation out of the murky streams of political communication’ (Habermas 2009, 160).

The role of the public sphere in legitimation processes is to identify issues and mobilise alternative and perhaps controversial answers (Habermas 2009, 162). No deliberation is expected to take place here, but still the demands for a political public sphere are considerable. The leading figures are expected to pick up impulses from civil society, address, discuss and reformulate them before they are ‘sluiced’ both to the public and to the political system (Habermas 2009, 162). Such reflexive public opinions are formulated as normatively conditional, which may be used as standards for identifying actual problems of communication. It is Habermas’ ambition to provide a normative model that is nevertheless empirically applicable (Habermas 2009, 163). This is the reconstructive point: an ideal that, Habermas argues, has its foundation in actual communication.

IMPLICATIONS OF MODERN MEDIA

Habermas’ main question in his keynote address to the media researchers at the International Communication Association conference in Dresden on June 20, 2006 was whether deliberation in the public sphere actually introduces an epistemic dimension to political decision-making, i.e. whether the public sphere can bring new insights and solutions to politics today. Habermas has previously given arguments for the potential of the public sphere, but what can be said about the
current condition in western democracies? The volume of political communication in the public sphere has expanded dramatically, but it is at the same time dominated by non-deliberative communication. Habermas argues that there is a lack of egalitarian face-to-face interaction and reciprocity between speakers and addressees in a shared practice of collective decision-making (Habermas 2006, 414). More importantly, the very dynamics of mass communication, Habermas claims, are driven by the power of the self-regulated system of the mass media to select and dramatise, simplify and polarise information. He presents something of a media-centric argument, suggesting that the increasing influence of radio and TV fosters increasing ignorance, apathy and low-level trust in politics: ‘The data I have mentioned suggest that the very mode of mediated communication contributes independently to a diffuse alienation of citizens from politics’ (Habermas 2006, 424). However, the strategic use of political power to influence and trigger agendas and issues is according to Habermas also an increasing problem. In other words, in the public sphere of communicative action, strategic action has continued to intervene.

For Habermas, ‘the networks of media and of news agencies form the infrastructure of the public sphere.’ (Habermas 2009, 164). With the mass media, the public sphere became dramatically widened, and with the Internet, it became ever more interaction-oriented, inclusive and complex. Habermas is painfully aware that the sociocultural challenges for a contemporary public sphere are immense. The cost of democratisation, Habermas argues, is a ‘decentring of unedited inputs, where the intellectual can no longer constitute a focal point’ (Habermas 2009). Diversity of interests, worldviews and cultural life forms increases the burden on convergence ability in the public sphere. How can all these different voices melt into a reasonable discourse that can inform, legitimise, and even rationalise politics? No doubt, democratic politics is attentive to public opinion. In fact, politics seems to have become media politics: “The inflated volume of messages, ideas and images in circulation creates at least an impression that contemporary politics is becoming ever more deeply entangled in processes of mass communication, indeed that it is being assimilated into and transformed by them’ (Habermas 2009, 153). It is Habermas' impression that we are witnessing a communicative ‘liquefaction’ of politics, which seems to be a consequence of the turn towards an information economy (Bell), information flows and information technology networks (Castells). Political communication circulates widely in society, often as a strategic ‘medium’.

However, according to Habermas, this tendency cannot cancel the principles of deliberation. The post war mass media society offered several functional features
to a stable political public sphere. Mass media tend to be relatively sensitive to lay people’s expressions and opinions but remain relevant for great publics and cannot – contrary to discussion and chat on Facebook or blogs – be too disturbed by the immediacy of trivial particularities. The popular sovereignty was heard through the voices of the intellectuals and the elite, which provided stability and quality. However, invitation to true dialogue with audiences was cumbersome, and opinion was relatively disconnected from learning and reasoning. The asymmetrical nature of the mass media tended to turn people into consumers and spectators. Mass communication divides the public sphere into a minority of experts and journalists who keep the conversation going, and a silently observing majority. Many in the supply-side group of information producers rarely enter into deliberation processes themselves, as that would conflict with their roles as neutral experts and professionals (Habermas 2009, 157).

Habermas distinguishes between three forms of power in the public sphere: (1) political power in constant need of at least passive legitimation in the form of reasonable agreement with the decision-making process; (2) power such as economic power deriving from positions in functional systems; and (3) media power of media professionals based on technology and mass media infrastructure, who define the public agenda and filter and stylise messages (Habermas 2009, 167–70). All three forms of power, Habermas argues, must, however, obey the communicative logic of the public sphere. In spite of uneven distribution of resources, and whatever their intentions, they must all respect the rule of the discursive game: The generally most reasonable and therefore most convincing arguments end up getting the upper hand. All agents must contribute facts and arguments that they consider convincing and which in turn are exposed to critical examination (Habermas 2009, 171).

One could get the impression that Habermas considers the mediated dimension of the public sphere as mainly composed by the press, increasingly challenged by radio and TV. But this impression would certainly underestimate Habermas as an observer of contemporary Europe. I believe that his passing and relatively dismissive judgement on the Internet derives from his prime interest in the public sphere seen from the point of view of political democracy, not from the point of view of the media. Habermas is primarily concerned with the deliberative legitimation of politics in differentiated and complex societies, which requires some kind of public focussing and ordering of issues and solutions. In Habermas’ examination, this leads to a focus on (1) national rather than on local and regional or global public spaces; (2) on the political public sphere at the expense of the literary/cultural public sphere; and (3) most importantly here, on the dimensions of the
political public sphere that directly influence legitimate, political decision-making by providing thematic focus and consolidation.

On the basis of Habermas’ thoughts, we may conclude that, first, what Habermas calls ‘issue publics’ overlap with publics with interest in social and political change, which is pursued through other media. Membership in various publics, either with respect to themes or media (magazine readers, human movements activists, bloggers, TV-viewers, etc.) is not mutually exclusive. Second, the diversity of Internet communication (measured as the scope of issues and viewpoints, degrees of civility) is larger than in the mass media, thus representing the worst and the best from the point of view of rational discourse. To control the explosive growth of information on the Net, socio-technological tools are developed to search, filter and target the available information (such as tags, filters, blog-lists, RSS-feeds, search engines, meta-sites, tracking systems, etc.). Third, with the Internet, the collective, mainstream nature of the hitherto mass-mediated public sphere has become more in tune with individualisation in modern society. With interaction rather than reception, subjective preferences and viewpoints are more easily articulated and linked to others, reproducing webs of intersubjectivity. The autonomy and self-realisation typically associated with the modern individual ‘fits’ better with the public sphere partly reproduced through what I call *personal media* (Rasmussen 2014). Personal media technologies like the mobile and the laptop with their wide variety of media, represent the modern individual’s communication tool in that they allow not only for social interaction with friends and relatives, but also for critical judgement vis-à-vis others in weak-tie associations that are linked together with new and old media.

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

INTERNET SCEPTICISM

In 2006, Habermas considered the Internet to be of little significance to the public sphere. Addressing the Internet only in passing, he pointed out that interaction on the Internet only has democratic significance in so far as it undermines censorship of authoritarian regimes. In democratic countries, however, the Internet serves only to fragment audiences ‘into a huge number of isolated issue publics’. Habermas claimed that: ‘Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication when news groups crystallise around the focal points of the quality press, for example national newspapers and political magazines’ (Habermas 2005, 422). To Habermas, the mass media constituted the main base of a modern public sphere because the quality press attracted interest for reasons of quality. In digital media, he could see no functional equivalents for the structures of publicity, which could reassemble and synthesise them in edited form: ‘Political communication within national publics seems at present to be able to benefit from online debates only when groups that are active on the web refer to real processes, such as election campaigns or current controversies, for example, in an attempt to mobilise the interest and support of members’ (Habermas 2009, 158). In a deliberative perspective, activity on the Net surrounding parties or newspapers seemed to be of limited value, and he preferred to rely on the more structured dynamics of mass communication.

Habermas has not been alone with this somewhat sceptical view. Benjamin Barber addressed the Internet in relation to his notion of a ‘strong democracy’, by which he means a democratic alternative where the citizens are engaged at the local and national levels in a variety of political activities, and where discourse and debate are essential conditions for reaching common ground in a multicultural society (Barber in Jenkins and Thorburn 2004, 37). In such a normative understanding, Barber argues, the Internet and new media technologies do not play a favourable role, due to a series of key attributes of the new media. Their speed, reductive simplicity and tendency to polarisation, the solitariness of their user interface, their bias towards images over text, their resistance to hierarchical mediations and their inclination towards segmentation rather to a single integrated community – all these tendencies – pull communication away from the possibility
of deliberation and informed choices. Furthermore, they tend to distribute illegitimate or confused information, in contrast to the authoritative interpretations in the mass media that form our norms and standards. Barber argued that digitalisation tends to compartmentalise information and to create knowledge niches for niche markets. This obstructs the common framework necessary for representative democracy and indispensable for a strong democracy (Barber 2003, 44).

A mature democracy, Barber argued, depends on knowledge rather than information and thus on mediators that test, verify and contextualise information in ways that make information meaningful. The Internet is not up to such a task, partly because it puts individual immediate needs before the considerations of the public sphere. Nicholas Negroponte (1995) was among the first to address the personalised character of news on the Net, what he called the ‘Daily Me’. Later, this personalisation has been reinterpreted as an unfortunate individualisation, which leads to a decline in civil engagement and a negative spiral of fragmentation of the common public sphere (Putnam 2001). Cass Sunstein (2009) warned that the Internet could have detrimental effects for the development of public opinion insofar as it may generate segmentation, parallel spheres or group polarisation. In such a structure, like-minded people will seek each other and cultivate their common view distant from others.

In a similar vein, Michael Schudson (in Jenkins and Thorburn 2004, 49) has argued that if digital media are to be integrated with democracy and into a serious understanding of citizenship, we need to expand our notion of citizenship from that of the informed citizen. Being informed is not the basis of a democracy, Schudson argues, and illustrates this with the rich conceptions of citizenship in American history. Schudson expressed doubt that the digital media will be able to support and serve to expand the current narrow notion of citizenship that in no way is prepared for a robust public sphere. Later, Schudson (2006) has argued more favourably that the Internet may assist political groups in doing more of what they are already organised to do. Internet use is a matter of amplifying existing forces. Generally, Schudson argues, it is difficult to speak of ‘impacts’ of technology on democracy, because both concepts entail so many things. Schudson (2006) notes that among the great transformations related to journalism and politics, only a few of them relate to new technologies. That social movements and trade unions turn to the Internet, he argues, is no evidence for the democratic potential of the Internet in any decisive way. Schudson is among those that argue that great political changes would have happened anyway, with or without the Internet.
CONCLUSION

From the sociological observation of modernity (pluralism, secularisation), Habermas’ theory is constructed to account for why pluralism is a challenge to the existing political structure. But then these reasons are formulated normatively. Explanations are turned into prescriptions: political action is seen to be rationalised through reflection as a basis for the reconstruction of a model of a rational society. Descriptions are, as Newey (2001, 132) points out, taken to be the basis for an essentially normative account of how ideally rational political agents would act. However, not all people are reasonable in the sense that they can follow a norm of non-contradiction (Geuss 2010, 54). First, people can hold contradictory views simultaneously and do not seem to suffer from that. Second, reason is only, if at all, one kind of authority in life. We see every day how people seek different kinds of cultural, religious, mystical, medical, etc. authorities. We cannot assume that reason holds a privileged position. Rather, political sociology ought to be sensitive to how principle, prudence and self-interest, means and ends, reason and emotion, are bound together in politics in potentially unpredictable ways, always partly dependent on circumstance and context. Third, sociology and political science emphasise the arbitrary, non-moral and non-reasonable aspects of politics because they think they flourish in politics, and because the Kantians are not willing to recognise this fully in their theories.

Contra Habermas, others have therefore argued that the notion of the public sphere must be considerably expanded if it is to include important changes in both Europe and less stable nation states. Nancy Fraser argues, as we have seen, that in a stratified society, the public sphere is and must be characterised by counter-publics: conflict-ridden, identity-based and often emotional (Fraser 1993). Fraser and others see struggle and contestation as intrinsic features of a public sphere in a pluralist and class-divided society, or simply as important public impulses to democracy (Papacharissi 2004).

In Germany for example, websites and debating sites popped up against government policy in 2015 when the migrant crisis escalated.1 Demonstrations against the refugee policy took place in all states, criminal acts on refugee asylum hostels and even arson attacks increased dramatically.2 While right-wing extremists used mainstream nationalist parties (such as the German AfD) to generate support, ordinary people were concerned with ordinary things. Many lost their polit-

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ical orientation in a depoliticised landscape and turned to the new and strong populist voices. This is ‘affective politics’ from the right, but it nevertheless indicates what Habermas once called colonisation of the lifeworld.

Deliberation is a too heavy a burden for the public sphere to carry. Withholding a too tight connection between a rational public sphere and a deliberative notion of democracy could imply exclusion of important types of non-discursive, collective forms of action, and in fact function ideologically. Milioni (2009), for instance, has studied the activist and alternative globalisation network Indymedia (NIMC) in Greece and found that the Internet, as the backbone of all activities, was used in innumerable innovative ways. She concludes that the concept of a public sphere is a useful concept to understand the online space, given that it acknowledges the diversity of publics, the new roles and repertoires of online activists and the need for an open model for political communication. Dahlgren reaches similar conclusions (Dahlgren 2005, 2013; see also Anduiza et al. 2012). Jodi Dean went further in suspecting that the arguments for the Internet as a public sphere work as ideologies that legitimise not only the Net but global capital, of what she calls communicative capitalism. The ideas about the Net as an inclusive and democratic site for debate and interaction are pursued, she argues, to establish the trust necessary for consumer confidence in online transactions, and ‘to make appear as a public sphere what is clearly the material basis of the global economy.’ (Dean, 2003, 100). When the Internet is said to have solved the democratic worry about whether face-to-face deliberation can work in large-scale societies, it really legitimises communicative capitalism. This is a point to which we will return.

The model of politics in Habermas is a peculiar theoretical hybrid of empirical description and idealised construction. Habermas’s version of political theory is normatively reconstructive in that it seeks to clarify the necessary and sufficient conditions for an optimal or ideal democracy. It is reconstructive in that it seeks to bring out latent structures inherent in language, culture and society that may be seen as a standard by which democracy can measure itself. Rawls call his approach utopian realism (as does Giddens, meaning that there is change inherent in all forms of order). It describes a formal political structure that exists, and then adds a utopian element; that all political agents operate morally, consistently and rationally. Ordinary people are seen – constructed – as free and equal citizens with a capacity for moral conceptions of justice and the good, operating in reasonable and comprehensive doctrines. An existing political structure is placed within a rational context of a just and good society with the help of the formulas of overlapping consensus or discursive ethics. An ideal–typical model of politics is then adapted to an ideal model of what the Kantians tend to think is politics.
There are other problems with idealisation in political theory: First, it backs away from real conditions involving action, conflict and power; second, it assumes a moral continuation, not rupture, from society to politics; and thus doesn’t sufficiently recognise politics as an autonomous domain. Third, its idealisation of theory shifts to making counterfactual (but strictly speaking false or impossible) claims about society – what society ought to or can achieve in terms of democracy. The problem here is that it may play an ideological role by diverting attention away from power and conflict; and, provide an image of politics and society that it cannot ever fulfil. Why should sociology operate with such illusions?
Chapter 5

The idea of a networked public sphere

Scholars in political sociology have suggested that the public sphere may be seen as tiered or compartmentalised with regard to the nature of the interaction, degree of formalisation or of justification of viewpoints. The idea is that the diversity may itself play a constructive role in the self-organisation of the public sphere. The challenge of meaning convergence, that is, of making order out of complexity or will formation out of opinion formation, has been analysed on two levels deriving from disciplines that until recently belonged to quite different research traditions. One tradition came out of network analysis and focused on the Internet as a socio-technological structure, whereas the other tradition came out of the Habermasian theory of the political public sphere and set out to do empirical studies of local, national and supranational public spheres in terms of media content. From both positions, a dramatic expansion and pluralisation of communication is observed that subsequently leads to examinations of the possibilities for integration and convergence (Davis 2009).

This chapter, from the point of view of complexity and the generation of a network-like structure on the Internet, particularly addresses Yochai Benkler’s broad analysis of current changes of the public sphere in his Wealth of Networks (2006). I argue that Benkler presents a bold and timely attempt at integrating the notion of the public sphere and the Internet. Network theory and analysis may shed light on much of the dynamic running the growth of the Internet. However, his idealist notion of both leads him toward a mystification of, and an unwarranted optimism about what currently goes on. A less idealistically informed network analysis may account for the concentration of capital, and the related interests in algorithmic surveillance and strict regimes of copyright lie outside his scope.

NEW MEDIA, GENRES, STYLES AND TOPICS

Since what I have called personal media allowed more people to produce texts and take part in communication, the Internet has offered new forms of access to public
authorities, new channels of coordination and influence for social movements, and a multitude of more or less stable settings for chat and discussions (Rasmussen 2013). On all accounts, digital media provide quite different circumstances for communication than the mass media. The most central ones can be listed as follows: (1) social movement activity (Internet, blogs, email, wikis); (2) discussion and chats among citizens (blogs, chatrooms, e-mail lists); (3) citizen access to MPs and public authorities (Internet, e-mail, blogs); (4) online ‘participatory’ journalism (Internet, email, SMS, MMS, blogs); (5) Connections and weak-tie networks (sites such as Facebook and Twitter); (6) search.

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

The differentiation of topics, styles and participants transforms the public sphere as well as how we view it in relation to democracy and culture. With regard to all three differentiation trends, the driving force is the personalisation of media on the Internet, thus enabling the individual to voice opinion directly to public power, to participate in campaigns and social movements, and to exchange opinions on online fora in her own ways and language, drawing upon personal experiences, knowledge, engagements, values and judgements. Because the threshold for speaking out on the Internet decreases, more people do so, and thus increasing participation lowers the threshold even further. And yet, because the threshold is still much higher than watching the television news, more involvement and interest accompany Internet participation. One tends to appear more as a person who is interested in particular themes and interests rather than someone who is simply
being a citizen among millions (Becker & Wehner 2001, 74). Whereas the mass media produce homogeneity, the multitude of Internet fora seems to produce a heterogeneity that has difficulties in controlling itself communicatively.

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

As a modern response to a dynamic democracy, the digital dimension of the public sphere offers less guidance for politics but more possibilities for expression. Compared to the journalism of mass media, online journalism tends to be more compartmentalised and based upon self-selection and personalisation. The criteria of selection are to be composed by the individual. Rather than offering carefully edited information, it offers a differentiated space for interaction and for presenting user-composed information, which tends to be rather specialised, and is also closer to personal opinion, rumour and unconfirmed information. Whereas the mass media works toward conformity and common denominators, the Internet is more oriented towards particular interests. It is located ‘between’ the mass media public and face-to-face interaction such as public meetings, rallies, etc. (Becker & Wehner 2001, 75).

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

Still, the vast majority of these fora fulfil some basic requirements of a public sphere: They are (as are the mass media and local meetings), committed to improve social conditions in one way or another, and also to free speech and open dialogue. They are also committed to make themselves understood and to understand others in an open space of an assumed indefinite audience, if for no other reason than to make rhetorical shortcuts or reach compromises. Some sort of cooperative action may seem to be at work here.

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

Still the term ‘community’, though often used to characterise value-based collectives of consensus-building and loyalty, is inadequate in accounting for online interaction, assuming too much fellowship and coercion while clarifying little about the empirical nature of public interaction and communication. In its place, an extended interpretation of the public sphere is needed (1) that recognises the role of the media without discriminating crudely between online and offline interaction, (2) that accounts for the construction and transformation of multiple and overlapping networks and the building of power that stem from such constellations, and (3) that accounts for purposive/instrumental, affective and expressive practices. If the ritualistic and cultural aspects of the term ‘community’ are toned down, it may capture the individual orientation towards stable social and political
networks, while the term ‘networked community’ more aptly covers the decision-oriented (rather than tradition-oriented) nature of current political expression.

### THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

Yochai Benkler’s study from 2006 clearly stands out as the most ambitious attempt to synthesise the idea of a rational and enlightened public sphere with the theory of social networks. While Manuel Castells’ voluminous work on the global ‘network society’ caught interest in the beginning of the century, he did not address public opinion as such. Jan van Dijk’s book (2012) *The Network Society* addresses the implications of digital media for democracy without discussing mediated public debate. In contrast to the reserved assessments of Habermas, Barber, Schudson and others, Benkler (2006) argued in this work that the Internet represents a significant change towards a more democratic and responsive public sphere. He enthusiastically argued that the transition from a mass media-structured public sphere to a distributed discursive architecture with multidirectional links among all nodes in the information environment has eliminated barriers to communication and fundamentally changed the possibilities for participation in the public sphere. In democratic countries, the lowered threshold for mediated conversation leads to a radical expansion of the public sphere. For totalitarian nations, this new architecture represents bad news—a new threat that they find very difficult to handle, due to the decentralised, end-to-end structure of the Internet. If at all, in what ways does the Internet democratise the public sphere?

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

What is of importance in Benkler’s understanding of a ‘networked public sphere’ is that smaller Web sites are linked thematically together, constituting clusters of public communication. However, there is also a concentration of attention on a limited number of Web sites. As Benkler (2006, 235) argues, ‘A tiny number of sites are read by the vast majority of readers, while many sites are never visited by anyone. In this regard, the Internet is replicating the mass media model, perhaps adding a few channels, but not genuinely changing anything structural.’

Exactly how concentrated the Web structure is in terms of linking and attention has been measured with network analysis. The results span from power law structure, to a distributed network structure. Still, search engines like Google point the reader towards relevant information. Against Cass Sunstein’s (2009) argument that the Web is increasingly fragmentary, Benkler argues for a networked public sphere of interlinked sites and arenas of communication. The polyphony of debate, argumentation, agitation and mobilisation constitutes, in an abstract sense, a complex sphere of public communication dedicated to matters relevant for all.

Social media networks generate social capital through a number of structural features, often conceptualised as the ‘architecture’ or ‘topography’ of networks. From the insight of network theory, I will mention four such structural features drawn from network analysis that also underlie Benkler’s argument (Rasmussen 2008, 2014):

**Clusters:** By mediating clusters of strong ties, and with high density of connections along with unifying norms and trust, social media mediate small community-like groups of sociality and loyalty. The effect of such bonding groups is a high degree of homogeneity. Such groups provide direct links to others, who each have links out of the group. However, such groups are relatively introverted, with relatively few connections out of the group compared to the connections inside the group. In other words, the connections are quite far from random. The redundancy is high inside the group, but low out of the group. The kind of social capital from such groups (best described by Coleman) is also called ‘thick’ social capital. Such clusters inhibit small world connections for the individual in the group. But when such clusters appear as nodes in larger networks, they serve the small world effect from the local level.
Short-cuts/redundancy: In networks of relatively random connections between the nodes, enabled by a large share of weak ties, bridges will also develop between networks. In large, random-like networks, there are fewer clusters and more random connections, and therefore a shorter path distance than in a world of clusters. A large share of my connections also know someone I don’t know, and some of them serve as bridges to other networks. The network is more individualistic, redundant and heterogeneous. In combination with clusters, it more easily connects dispersed groups.

Supernodes: Online and offline networks tend to generate a certain bias, favouring the nodes that enter the network early or possess other advantages. Merton called this the Matthew effect; others call it the Pareto effect. The long tail thesis demonstrates the same thing. The web-topology develops relatively few supernodes (extraordinarily popular sites), and a very large number of smaller sites. Web use creates ‘mountain-peaks’ in the horizon, which everyone sees regardless of where one is positioned, and which dramatically reduce the number of steps between randomly selected nodes. Power-law distributions emerge, due to knowledge, conformity and time. Herbert Simon pointed towards time and attraction as the two central mechanisms that tend to create bias. A self-enforcing differentiation takes place, which is strategically developed, as in Google’s search method, and in rating methods (Slashdot, Digg). Popularity leads to more popularity. This point, I argue, has proven itself highly valid the last decade, and could not be sufficiently addressed by Benkler.

Cascades: Increasing exposure to practices of others with lower thresholds than oneself leads to lowering thresholds for joining campaigns, petitions, spreading ‘memes’ (jokes, images), etc. and by spreading scandalous information, snowball effects more easily emerge and end. Virus-like phenomena appear due to the speed and reach of information, which for some reason seems important, scandalous or provocative. As accumulated side-effects, certain forms of information are imitated and duplicated locally, and escalate. New information of some considered importance (again popularity) reaches the individual.

Successful social media allow for all these features in a productive combination: They enhance a small world effect by aiding the users to navigate locally and long-distance, to identify changes and pick up news and groups, and to establish
new connections. They potentially magnify the effects of individual actions, and so instigate social change. They all remain dependent on individual action. Most of all, and absent from Benkler’s analysis, is the accumulation of capital and power that this network logic enhances.

What Benkler describes is not only relevant for public communication on the Internet, but for the public sphere in general. The most viable way of understanding the current public sphere in Europe is precisely as ‘polyphony’ – as a network of networks of sites of communication. As noted, Habermas (1996) too has used ‘network’ as a metaphor for the current public sphere without elaborating on this further. Empirical research on the quality of the public sphere needs to consider the Internet as a functional complement to the mass media and face-to-face interactions. A vibrant and democratic public sphere depends on its internal composition and dynamics, particularly whether the direct interaction, the mass media and personal media based on the Internet are integrated with one another through overlapping networks of individuals, themes, opinions and knowledge crossing in various ways and shapes between its ‘compartments’ and realms.

Blogs are a case in point. Benkler observes that bloggers work from a different logic than the mass media and so may pursue issues independently of the agendas of media and politics and may also pursue stories over a longer time than the mass media with their short news cycle. Nor are bloggers dependent on norms of objectivity and neutrality, which inhibit mass media from participation in campaigns against negative forces in society. From the perspective of conventional journalistic norms, engagement is considered unprofessional in the mass media. Nevertheless, stories that are brought up by blogs or smaller websites need to be picked up by the mass media in order to affect the political public sphere. The inner circles of the public sphere close to the centre of political decision-making are still dominated by the national mass media. But the new sources of insight and debate more frequently come from the networked information environment. The bloggers are feeding the watchdogs.

A research strategy to clarify the networked character of the public sphere would be to apply network analysis software to detect hypertext links between local, national and international websites. Another approach would be to focus on certain distinct issues, to see how argumentation in various media refers to each other or is interlinked in other ways. Regardless of the specific results, such analysis would conclude on degrees of connectedness within a population.
DEMONOCRATISMATION?

With the growing complexity of digital and analogue communication, how can argumentation and deliberation survive in this communicative cacophony? How can the threads of communication somehow be untangled and filtered towards a more unified voice, and into an underlying sense of community or even a true public opinion? The key is the network structure of the Internet and its media. The internal dynamics of filtering and synthesis by way of links (references, feeds, retweeting, etc.) enable those who are interested in the topic and connected to any of the participatory sites to get familiar with opinions and facts on the issue. By way of the structural features of the Net, and in spite of its dramatic and dynamic growth, thousands of views can in fact coalesce around certain central arguments, events or sites, presenting petitions, boycotts, campaigns, etc.

This relates foremost to structural aspects of the Internet and web predominantly addressed by network analysis. Insights from mathematics-informed sociological network analysis have shown how the Net operates in synthetic ways that create some sense of order on the Net despite its enormous activity and incredible diversity. This form of analysis has some direct implications for studies of the Internet as an engine for the political public sphere, because they can counter allegations about the Internet’s non-democratic effects, such as information overload, centralisation and digital divides. And most importantly, this analysis addresses the claim that the widespread use of the Net may undermine the critical and investigative function of the mass media and possibly the whole existence of the paper-based press.

Consequently, in this network perspective the political public sphere is considered as an open and complex network of networks of ideas and arguments about public themes, a place where agents and powers seek to make judgements and legitimise statements and actions. This understanding accomplishes the following: (1) it stresses the function of the public sphere as a space of communicative legitimacy; (2) it excludes the motivations of individual and collective actors; (3) it excludes the actual media and arenas of communication; (4) it includes the imperative of both diversity and focus of communication, and (5) it includes both the chat-like and the deliberative character of public communication. However, in this perspective, there are no counter-public spheres detached from the main public sphere and no plurality of public spheres, only interconnected ‘nodes’ of debates and counter-debates, publics and counter-publics. The connections between discursive nodes expand the range of arguments, problems and solutions, and widen the range of quality of argumentation.
An additional point is that this approach is not only normatively reconstructive in a Habermasian sense, it even enthusiastically welcomes a dramatic democratic change, due to the emphasis on network-enhancing digital technology. Citizens are no longer absorbed in observing and listening audiences but experience themselves as more responsible for local and national affairs. They are no longer simply private observers but subjects involved in public and political communication (Benkler 2006, 213). Even more dramatic is the structural changes of the public sphere itself. Benkler argues that the production of the public sphere benefits significantly from the networked information economy that has emerged since the '90s, with the World Wide Web and web-based media like blogs, wikis and other social media. They offer insights and commentary of a rather different character than do mass media that are often dominated by conventional views considered to be accepted by the public, and by the views of their owners. Internet-based media are set up by NGOs or individuals that have different approaches to issues and that present their case in different, often unconventional and non-journalistic ways. The facts presented are different and so are the views and strategies that contextualise them. Typically, politically important revelations published in the mass media are often picked up from low-budget blogs and sites like Wikileaks. Many of the sites and blogs depend neither on advertising nor do they express mainstream tastes and opinions, since the motivation for publishing is anchored in personal engagement.

FRAGMENTATION AND CONCENTRATION

Among the most frequent arguments against the Internet as a contributor to the production of the public sphere is that the enormous activity on the Net creates a chaotic, fragmented discourse, which in turn may lead to ‘balkanisation’, or parallel communities: isolated groups cultivating introvert, sometimes extreme views. The critique is that this Internet-based public sphere will not be able to serve its democratic function vis-à-vis the political decision-making domain. Alternative ideas and constructive views will tend to get lost in the jungle of fragmented communication. Cass Sunstein (2009) argued that the omnipresence of information combined with a weakened press to condense and synthesise would undermine the common base for political discourse. Related is the point that fragmentation leads to polarisation and reinforcing of views and beliefs. When contrary or conflicting positions rarely get the possibility to meet and challenge one another, they tend to develop more extreme views and develop further distance from one another. This is precisely what is not supposed to happen in the public
sphere, according to the Habermasian approach. Group escapism, what Todd Gitlin (1998) called ‘sphericules’, goes dramatically against the value of sharing ideas, encountering new viewpoints and confronting arguments with arguments. On the contrary, it may in turn lead to islands of extremism and ignorance. Research has, as we will see, analysed alleged tendencies of ‘homophily’ and found that if people with some shared interests and opinions form clusters, this makes it less likely that people of different opinions find one another in debate. But they may find each other indirectly through news feeds and linking. Clusters of similar interest may trigger some collective engagement, but they may also form isolated groups that conform to biased images of society.

Illustrative of this is the debate in the United States about whether the Internet is to blame for an increasingly polarised political atmosphere between adherents of the two main political parties (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; McCarty et al. 2006). Analysis of the American blogosphere showed that political bloggers tend to belong either to a right wing or a liberal cluster, and that they link almost only to blogs on their own side of the political gap (Adamic and Glance 2005; Hargittai et al. 2008). A similar tendency has been found on Twitter (Conover et al. 2011). Readers of political blogs also tend to be more politically engaged than others and to follow blogs that support their own view (Lawrence et al. 2010). Farrell suggests from various findings that a large group of blog readers tends to be exposed to a wide variety of online sources and views, whereas another smaller group of generally more politically active people preferentially follows political blogs of their own view and to a far lesser extent reads blogs of different views (Farrell 2012, 42). Research indicates that the more connections to other political leanings people have, the less likely they will engage politically (Mutz 2006). Cross-cutting relationships among friends and work is considered to be a good thing but tends to weaken political engagement, while increasing political engagement stimulates group isolation and polarisation. There thus seems to be a trade-off, or a dilemma, between political involvement and cross-political interaction. Causes and effects in such cases are, however, very difficult to unpack, and research conducted by Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010), based on a large sample of blogs, did not support the polarisation thesis.

Another type of critique takes the view that the Internet has developed concentration and marginalisation. While the vast majority of speakers on the Net are never heard, a tiny minority of sites or individuals is highly linked and receives the vast majority of visits and attention. This critique is based on studies of Internet linking and addressing, which clearly shows a skewed distribution of linking and visits on the Internet. There is a low probability that a web site will be linked
to from many other sites, and a very high probability that for a given web site, one or no other site will link to it. The blogosphere is another similar case: While the proliferation of blogs was seen as an important democratic innovation, as it allowed anyone to become a publisher at little or no cost, others commented that the blogosphere preserved the biased profile of the mass media society, because a group of elite bloggers attracted most of the attention; whereas the majority of bloggers receive few visits (Farrell and Drezner 2008; Shirky 2009). American research also indicated that successful bloggers tended to be narrowly recruited socio-economically (Hindman 2008).

The distribution of linking forms what is called a right-skewed distribution and a power-law distribution (Benkler 2006, 244). If we are to associate democracy with a statistically normal distribution, the Internet is far from democratic. For reasons of ‘preferential attachment’, the early established and thus highly visible and frequently visited nodes on the Net tend to grow at the expense of the late-coming majority of less visible ones, because we tend to do what others do and have done: Linking tends to be conforming behaviour: It generates conservative patterns. New nodes tend, on average, to be less frequently visited than the ‘first riders’. Of course, there are important exceptions to this tendency, such as Google. Over time, however, the dynamic Internet topology has established a limited number of supernodes and a multitude of rarely visited sites. The concentration of linking among certain giant nodes, Benkler argues, has a strikingly democratic effect. The new infrastructure that lies under a wide range of digital media seems to work in ways that favour freedom of expression, diversity and conversation. Filtering and synthesis mechanisms seem to yield clustering and redundancy, with the happy effect of convergence without control. Benkler argues that the networked public sphere allows hundreds of millions of people to publish without consequences of disintegration and concentration.

We know that the network at all its various layers follows a degree of order, where some sites are vastly more visible than most. This order is loose enough, however, and exhibits a sufficient number of redundant paths from an enormous number of sites to another enormous number, that the effect is fundamentally different from the small number of commercially professional editors of the mass media (Benkler 2006, 253).

Benkler argues from this that the topology of the Net is ordered through some highly visible peaks supplemented with sufficient redundancy of links so that no node controls the flow of information. The power-law distribution neutralises the fragmentation argument, and the redundancy argument neutralises the concentration and polarisation arguments. Following Benkler, the Internet cancels out all
main obstacles to ordered diversity, which makes it perfect as a platform for the democratic public sphere. It is both more resistant to control, and less susceptible to trivialisation than are the mass media.

Benkler shares Habermas’ view on the public sphere, along with the deliberative democracy approach, although he locates the Internet in a different factual position. Both emphasise the importance of generating involvement in the civil sphere around controversial issues. Still, Benkler goes further and argues that the Internet more than the mass media enables users to take part in dialogues where they experience themselves to be real participants in debates on society. Benkler's argument about the networked information economy as a platform for the public sphere is based on normative arguments about human reason and normative political theory, supplemented with an account of technological change: On the distributed, end-to-end nature of the Internet as a network, Benkler’s position is highly normative in that his objective is to show what we lose if the structure of the Internet becomes corrupted. The Internet can only function in a liberal and liberating way if it functions along the lines it has done so far. If any of the global Internet corporations such as Google or Facebook become so powerful that they can lock our communication into their proprietary services, the Internet as a democratic platform may get lost. This applies too, we may add, if national intelligence agencies ally with the multinational Internet industry in conducting widespread eavesdropping and surveillance of both ordinary citizens and politicians. Nevertheless, Benkler clearly stands out as a liberal idealist.

Benkler’s analysis ignores the problems of the concentration of proprietary control and ownership, leading to what I have called supernodes. (Rasmussen 2014; Fuchs 2014). All emphasis is on open structure of the Internet and the lower threshold for access to the public sphere. This kind of idealism is widespread in the writing about the Internet. Another more realist-oriented view would take into consideration the structure and content of websites and mega-corporations like Apple, Google and Facebook. In spite of the distributed networked structure of its original and initial structure, the Internet is becoming centralised in terms of services like social media, search, streaming and consumer retailing. I have addressed the social and conflict-oriented history of the Internet in another work (Rasmussen 2007). Here, I can only indicate the most central problem areas: (1) the privatisation of messaging services in corporate social media, and of the portals to the web; (2) the surveillance, big data analysis and reselling of personal data for targeted advertising; (3) the cooperation between large media companies and public intelligence agencies like NSA on exchange of private data revealed by Edward Snowden, and (4) The unwillingness of large Internet companies to oper-
ate in accord with public regulations regarding data protection and market regulation. User data are thus raw products for private advertising industry and for international state pervasive surveillance.

CONCLUSION

These aspects cannot be ignored in the assessment of the Internet-mediated public sphere since it affects the way social interaction operates freely and actually serves the intended purpose of creating a rational foundation for public decision-making. Public communication without privacy is hard to imagine in questions of controversy. We have already seen how dangerous whistle-blowing is in questions of national and diplomatic secrecy. It is also a fact that encryption has become the recommended solution for groups fearing state monitoring. To the extent that this image of rational public sphere is undermined (and has been for a long time), another conception of public debate needs to be developed that more accurately describes the reality. This reality can be described as public participation under the condition of social control, similar to what Habermas once characterised as feudalisation and colonisation. We are not here talking about a liberal public sphere suffering some temporary deficiencies, but rather public opinion as a sphere for conflict, profit and self-legitimation of power. To explore this process of meaning-formation and control, a more accurate image of politics and public opinion is to be found, not in Kantian and contractual approaches, but in the more realist tradition from Machiavelli and Hobbes via Weber to Bernard Williams.
Chapter 6

Political power and the complexity of the public sphere

With the advent of the Internet, the collective, mainstream nature of the mass-mediated public sphere became more in tune with the thesis on ‘individualisation’ in modern society (Bauman, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). With interaction and participation enhanced by enhanced digital media, reception, subjective preferences and viewpoints are more easily articulated and linked to others, re/producing webs of intersubjectivity. The autonomy and self-realisation typically associated with the modern individual ‘fits’ better with a public sphere partly reproduced through Internet-based ‘personal’ media as opposed to mass media. The personalisation of media on the Internet enables the individual to voice opinion directly in social networks, to participate in campaigns and social movements, and to exchange opinions in social media in his or her own ways and language, drawing upon personal experiences, knowledge, engagements, values and judgements (Becker and Wehner, 2001; Benkler, 2006). Because the threshold for speaking up in the public sphere is reduced in online environments, more people take part, a trend that minimises the threshold further. Whereas general mass media, including their online versions, tend to produce homogeneity so as to target mainstream markets, the majority of Internet fora, blogs, Twitter and Facebook produce a heterogeneity that seems to have difficulties in integrating itself reflexively.

An essential question is how this hyper-complex public sphere can ensure legitimacy and stability for the political system. In this chapter, I review research on the political use of Internet-based media, and argue for a differentiation of the Internet-based public sphere. I draw on the example of the EU and claim that there are few reasons to defend a consensus-bearing public sphere. I argue that the current, differentiated political public sphere will provide a less stable platform for political decision-making and there is no European public sphere in sight. This may not imply that the idea of a singular public sphere should be abandoned at a national level. For every representative and formal political institution, such as
municipal and regional authorities or parliaments, there is a public sphere working as a normative resonance board for its decisions. In relation to national parliaments, there is a circulation of topical communication oriented towards processes related to these institutions. I therefore speak of the public sphere in the singular for one theoretical and one empirical reason. Theoretically, it makes it easier to see the essential role of the public sphere particularly when, as here, the public sphere is addressed as an instrument for formal politics; consequently, I consider the public sphere as a societal domain connecting the private sphere and the state. Empirically, isolated ‘public spheres’ in time and space are highly unlikely phenomena due to the constantly circulating, flowing and leaking nature of communication. Thus, the serious structural challenge I address here is not the complete splitting of public political discourse but the increasing differentiation of groups, topics and styles within the public sphere, which may make it less suitable as a guide to public opinion, and more vulnerable for selectivity and manipulation by formal politics.

IS DIFFERENTIATION A DEMOCRATIC PROBLEM?

It is hardly surprising that media research in the 1990s turned to Habermas’ study of the transformation of the early European bourgeois public sphere, and to later theories of political deliberation, to understand the significance of the Internet in relation to social change and politics. Theories of constitution of public meaning addressed precisely what the Internet offered: a limitless discursive space with dramatically expanded possibilities for productive and enlightening meaning-formation. Research has demonstrated that digital fora of various sorts have the capacity to mediate engagement and critical discussion about issues of common public interest. It has analysed the ability of the Internet to support public deliberation, examining how blogs and fora contribute to the critical public sphere locally, nationally and internationally by reproducing normative conditions for public opinion formation (Becker and Wehner, 2001; Benkler, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001; Räsänen and Kuovo, 2007).

The current astonishing differentiation of topics, styles and participants transforms the public sphere and how we view it in relation to democracy and culture. The Internet plays an active role in the current dramatic differentiation of the public sphere, in terms of topics debated, styles applied and persons involved. The diversity of communication on the Internet is in part caused by (1) anonymity and quasi-oral styles of communication facilitating extreme viewpoints, uncivil char-
acteristics, and unconventional ways of argumentation; (2) diversity of communicative forms and genres (in social media like Facebook, chat fora, Twitter, blogs and homepages with comment functions), and (3) diversity of intertextual connections among online fora (hyperlinks, RSS feeds, social media, search engines).

In their reciprocity and heterogeneity, the Internet and the web complement the mass media. On the one hand, the international mass media enable broad attention around some prioritised public topics ‘of national interest’. On the other, the Internet underpins the individualisation and segmentation of modern societies, with attention and engagement spread among a wider range of topics, making a political focus difficult to trace by those in formal politics. As a modern response to a dynamic democracy, the plethora of digital arenas for debate offers less guidance for politics but more possibilities for personal expression. Compared to conventional mass-mediated journalism, online journalism tends to be more compartmentalised and based upon self-selection and personalisation. Selection criteria are produced by those who communicate. Rather than simply offering carefully edited information, the majority of Internet-based media provide a differentiated space for interaction and user-composed information that tends to be rather specialised – often closer to personal opinion, unconfirmed information and rumour. In general, whereas the mass media tend to work toward the mainstream, the Internet encourages diversity.

The current political public sphere is generally conceived as a ‘space’ produced by communication about public matters as in journalism, opinion and argumentation, in face-to-face communication as well as in mediated communication. Such public discourses in a wide range of places, media and genres may lead to more or less converging views on public matters, i.e. matters that concern all potentially affected, whether in a local community, the nation state or super-national regions like the EU, or for that matter, globally. The interchange is ideally based on argumentation but may also be impulsive, emotional and mediated through various aesthetic means (Papacharissi 2004). The ability and ways to articulate points of view may vary greatly in style and formality, as well as in range of themes. However, the diversity may subsequently enter into a more binding and disciplined form in quality newspapers and parliament deliberations (Bimber 1999; Gimmler 2001; Raphael and Karpowitz 2013).

During the era of the press and broadcasting, the public sphere was split between a minority of speakers and a majority of listeners. The one-way, mass-oriented technologies of print and broadcasting enabled this division, which in many ways contradicted the democratic dictum that all individuals should have the opportunity to express their views, and take part in society and politics as cit-
izens. What neutralised some of this division between supply and demand was the face-to-face interaction in all kinds of associations and organisations in society, which picked up and processed the themes of the mass media. The Internet and the web changed all this in several steps. During the last two decades, the complexity of the public sphere in terms of arenas, styles, genres and themes has exploded. The most significant changes have occurred since the 1990s with the World Wide Web, the smart phone and social media.

What is genuinely novel with the Internet in a democratic perspective is that it has bridged the social division between speakers and listeners of the public sphere, and turned everyone into potential participants in numerous public interactions and debates, without cancelling the possibility of communication in an expanded space. Through blogs, YouTube and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, the public has transformed itself into narrators, reporters, editors and broadcasters (Davis 2009). To be sure, the Internet is approached by the population as consumers and private persons more than as citizens. Nevertheless, as we know, the Internet is intensively used by national and international NGOs and civil organisations, ad hoc manifestations, political parties and individual politicians.

**SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT ON THE NET**

In the 1990s, scholars pointed out the overlapping features of the Internet (its interconnectivity, its hypertextuality and flexibility in time and space, its variability in terms of media forms, etc.) and the model of the open and reasoning public sphere by Jürgen Habermas (1996, 2009). However, only empirical research could assert whether these forms and features of the Internet and the Web were actually empowering individuals and social institutions in their engagement for social and political change. A number of studies analysed online debating fora to see whether they develop towards inclusive dialogue-oriented spheres (Hill and Hughes 1998; Holt 2004; Raphael and Karpowitz 2013).

Every new medium will quickly stimulate new visions and worries about how it may rearrange society. With the advent of the Internet and the Web as widespread communication media in the 1990s, theories of a more involving, including and active democracy were reconsidered. As an example, Peter Dahlgren (1995) made the points that first, the composition of publics changed, most noticeably a growing plurality and heterogeneous composition of communicating individual and collective agents, including counter-publics. From a male, middle class-dominated activity, the public sphere is now increasingly marked by religious and eth-
nic diversity, and also a more balanced representation in terms of age and gender. This fact implies that participants in the public sphere bring with them very different and often contrasting lifeworlds involving heterogeneity of life experiences and expectations towards society and politics. Second, this diversity leads to new processes of identity formation, which evidently include emotional and aesthetic expressions along with contestation and conflict, since the public sphere will be influenced by stratification and unequal social conditions. And third, the probability for actual deliberation remains a topic of contestation itself in the public sphere (Dahlgren 2005; Dahlgren and Olsson 2007).

Another research approach in the 1990s was to analyse the ability of the Internet to increase or erode social engagement. Social capital was then seen as individual resources invested in political communication, deriving from participation in social groups of various sorts. Research indicated that Internet use meant less time spent on other forms of communication, including participation in public associations and other forms of civic engagement (Nie and Erbring 2000). Other studies, however, indicated that time spent on the Internet increased or supplemented civic engagement (Shah et al. 2001; Wellman et al. 2001). Similarly, in a later study in several European countries, frequent Internet use co-varied with civic engagement in the public sphere or in civil society (Räsänen and Kuovo 2007). Internet use proved more significant for social involvement than variables like age and gender. Sociological studies on Internet-based civic involvement indicated that these kinds of social and political practices involving the Internet have been growing (Kahn and Kellner 2004). On the other hand, more Internet-time was also spent on non-civic forms of communication (computer games, entertainment, etc.).

Internet-based structures of communication, including e-mail, mailing lists, wikis, blogs, chat groups or network sites like Facebook, all base their existence on information and communication from their users, including a wide variety of participants, events, views and topics. Not surprisingly, media theory and Internet-research turned rather quickly to Habermas’ study of the early European bourgeois public sphere and to theories of deliberation. Theories of deliberation addressed precisely what the Internet seemed to offer: possibilities for formation of productive enlightening and public opinion on a much broader scale than previously seen in history. This provided formation of public opinion as a medium between citizen preferences and political institutions. Several studies demonstrated that digital fora of various sorts have the capacity to create engagement and generate critical discussion about important issues of common public interest (Coleman & Götze 2001).
Similarly, research has examined the ability of the Internet to carry public deliberation (for an overview see Dahlberg 2001). A number of studies conclude that the Internet increases the number of social contacts and relationships because it generally increases the opportunities for interaction (DiMaggio et al. 2001; Wellman et al. 2001; Uslaner 2004; Cummings & Craut 2002). It is also argued that Internet activity does not take place at the expense of offline interaction but instead supplements it (Frazer 2000; Gershuny 2003; Lievrouw 2001; Shah et al. 2001). For instance, several studies of social capital and Internet use indicate that Internet use increases and supplements civic involvement (Wellman et al. 2001). Voluntary and political work in NGOs and social movements now requires the use of the Internet, and associations in music, sports, the arts, etc. generally use the Internet to communicate internally and to announce their existence on the Web. A general conclusion is that up to 2000, discussion fora on the Internet contributed to the critical public sphere, whether locally, nationally or internationally by reproducing normative conditions for public opinion formation.

A DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE?

The lower threshold for political participation on the Internet compared to the mass media was generally seen as positive for democracy. Yet as we know, this fact was not without side effects of more ambivalent character, such as scepticism towards political institutions, and decreasing involvement in types of collective action that require more than simple computer work. People may prefer to enter into visible, if ineffective forms of political engagement, rather than political work that may be long-term and risky (Morozov 2012). Furthermore, against Clay Shirky's argument that collective activities now can be coordinated more flexibly than ever, Malcolm Gladwell argued that the ability of many Internet media to create weak ties makes them less suited for building social movements that need strong tie organising (Gladwell 2010; Shirky 2009). A plausible conclusion from the interchange between Shirky and Gladwell, we may add, is that NGOs and social movements need to construct themselves through media of strong personal gatherings and meetings, and weak ties to reach a more widely sympathising, if less active, audience.

The wide range of studies in the 1990s and into the new millennium on the relationship between the Internet and political participation in the public sphere (involving qualitative interview data, surveys, focus groups and observation) pointed in different directions. Just like studies on social capital and civic partici-
In research, it was difficult to agree upon a general tendency. The impasse reflected the variety of different methods used, different national cultures and technological situations. Also, research was aimed at a rapidly moving target: The proliferation of Internet services diffused quickly throughout western societies, if with an uneven pace.

More importantly, the enquiries did in fact not address comparable phenomena. A variety of media (web, Internet Relay Chat, Internet messaging services, e-mail, etc.) was lumped together under the label of ‘Internet use’ (Rasmussen et al. 2010). However, in the first decade of the new millennium, it became quite clear that the staff in informatics departments were quite right in insisting that the Internet is not a medium at all, but an *infrastructure* much like railways and roads, which (according to its protocols or traffic signs) carries various media and genres like e-mail, file transfer, blogs, micro-blogs like Twitter, telephony, video, networking sites and more. The natures of these media vary greatly in the ways they present and mediate communication, and invite different kinds of use. Therefore, they must be kept separate in an analysis of their role in the public sphere. Following the now elementary insight that the Internet is an open infrastructure for many different media, a change of Internet research took place that differentiated between media and addressed them in the light of political public sphere theory. This closer connection to the political agenda also originated from the fact of the uneven growth in Internet use. Around the new millennium, the proportion of individuals using the Internet was around 50 percent in the OECD countries, but with considerable variance between the Scandinavian countries and southern Europe. With the continuing growth, the differences have been minimised.

Following this view on politics as omnipresent information, Elmer et al. addressed how the Internet, WWW and social media like Facebook and Twitter have entered and redefined the ‘permanent campaign’ through new spaces of communication like social media platforms, new roles, political actors, and through the circulation political communication, what they call ‘issue-objects’ (Elmer et al. 2012, 5). Political communication, they argue, must now include the ever-expanding capacity for information storage and retrieval, new entry point of communication, and expanded sites and modes of self-expression. With social media platforms, particularly, the actors, places and topics in political communication are multiplied (Elmer et al. 2012, 6). The network of political communication is more open-ended and distributed; has thus fewer central nodes, gatekeepers and agenda setters; and depends more on visibility and uses of time. It opens the field for non-professional political actors on Twitter, Facebook and blogs, such as partisan bloggers (Elmer et al. 2012). Overall, they present an image of a more stra-
tegically organised public sphere, although stressing that the permanent campaign remains a contested terrain where all statements are continually called into question and potentially destabilised.

**EPISTEMIC DUALITIES**

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

The deliberative approach distinguishes sociologically between the formal parliamentary public sphere, and the informal public sphere or spheres. The latter is here thought of as 'composed of a plurality of publics overlapping and abutting one another, rather than as a unitary public idealised perhaps in the ancient Greek agora…' (McBride 2005, 508) McBride concludes that ‘If citizens are to enjoy political autonomy, then democratic institutions must ensure that communication flows freely between these publics, the realisation of democracy not being confined to the formal parliamentary sphere alone.’ This sociological two-track model between the formal and the informal public sphere serves to highlight the importance of the informal public sphere as a context of discovery, ‘in which social criticism can serve to problematize social practices and institutions and in so doing make them a theme for deliberation within the formal public sphere.’ (McBride 2005, 508, see also Habermas 1996, 307). In the two-track model of deliberative politics, inclusivity is not met satisfactorily by democratic representation in the parliament, but must be guaranteed through equal, broad and active participation in informal publics, and equally important, that ‘the lines of communication between formal and informal publics are kept open despite the attempts of elites to control them.’ (McBride 2005, 508)

A former collaborator of Habermas, Bernard Peters, pioneered in doing empirical studies of the political public sphere and suggested ways to operationalise the concept (Peters 1997, 2004). He distinguished between a wide public sphere involving journalism, public performances and other public events, and a narrower public sphere involving justification and argumentation, explanations, openness for objections and recognition of fallibility occurring in political meet-
ings, seminars and workshops, as well as in quality newspapers and broadcasting programmes. In its wide version, the main value of the public sphere lies in the ability and possibility of expression, if experimental, expressive and transitory. Such events express and provide vitality and colour to the public sphere. The narrower kind of public sphere would rather provide deliberative convergence of views based on argumentative reason, right to the doorstep of political decision-making.

Habermas himself follows Bernhard Peters’ idea that processes of communication and decision-making lie along a centre-periphery axis as a system of ‘sluices’ in public discourse and generally involve two modes of problem-solving: The periphery of groups and associations of many sorts that supply and receive ideas and opinions for political decision-making, and formal political procedures in the core system. Peters (1997) distinguished between public communication involving the mass media and public events, demonstrations and happenings, and a deliberative public sphere involving rational argumentation. The first kind of public communication includes experiments, expressive, affective and aesthetic expressions including transitory and issue-oriented controversies, and demonstrations. The latter kind specifically includes the justification of arguments and statements regarding public affairs, which the political system relates to in their parliamentary and legislative processes. The first kind injects vitality, provocation, fresh ideas and new arguments into the public sphere. The second deliberative public sphere provides reasoning and rational justification, and is located ‘between’ the political system and the wider sphere of expressive public communication. These two forms of public communication are also called public communication and public discourse. The latter consists of a smaller segment of the first, as it is oriented towards deliberation with arguments and facts. In Between Facts and Norms, Habermas (1996) makes a distinction between the informal public sphere supported and protected by citizenship and universal civil rights, and a formal public sphere of political bodies, formal will formation (argumentation, justification) and decision-making. Habermas’ version of a deliberative model of democracy relies on a conception of the interplay between informal opinion formation and institutionalised formal will formation. As we have seen, and unlike conventional political theory, Habermas argues that regulated procedures of debate need the underlying informal communication as not only a legitimation process but as a process of improving the quality of decisions.

Nancy Fraser (1995) makes a similar distinction between soft and strong versions of public deliberation. The strong version influences the public debate, whereas the softer versions have influence that is more indirect. Similarly, Van de
Steeg (2002, 508) distinguishes an empirically specific concept of public discourse from the wider concept of the public sphere, where the first constitutes the aggregate of texts and media debates, and the latter constitutes its potential and reference background. Public discourse refers to a finite number of issues that circulate between media and communicative contexts, and where some form of public opinion formation emerges on the background of the reservoir of the public sphere. Eriksen (2005) distinguishes between a general public sphere with free access to opinion formation processes, transnational-segmented publics of experts and policy-developers dedicated to distinct topics, and strong publics such as parliaments, in the political system. Eriksen thus includes will-formation of the political system in the public sphere. Also, the EMEDIATE project at the European University Institute made a distinction between the hard public sphere as the dimension of a political public sphere that is directly relevant for a democratic society, and the softer, non-institutional public sphere (Schulz-Forberg, 2005). These ideas indicate an internal functional duality within the public sphere, as they distinguish analytically between a ‘thick’ and a ‘thin’ dimension of that sphere. The thick dimension includes the vast universe of cultural, expressive, pseudo-private statements, whereas the thin dimension includes deliberation in a stricter sense. The question then is how the mass media and the personal media of the Internet position themselves vis-à-vis these distinctions.

Along these views, but emphasising the digital dimension, I distinguish between two dimensions of the public sphere, related to both topics, style and participants, and with reference to different functional emphasis. The representational dimension refers to the heterogeneity of topics, styles and groups that take part, and which reflects culture and everyday life, only seen before in everyday conversations and more or less peripheral social settings (clubs, parties, unions, therapy groups, etc.) With the expansion of this dimension through digital media, the public sphere is now becoming increasingly differentiated and diversified with regard to people, issues, styles and attitudes. In a numerical sense, it is becoming more democratic and inclusive, and also far more complex. This dimension is oriented towards culture, sports, science and everyday life, as well as politics. In the representational dimension, extensive differentiation of themes and styles is not balanced by generalisation. Internet-based media plays a vital part in this dimension.

The second dimension – the presentational dimension – refers to the deliberation over common issues by central figures acting as voices of the people. It presents a public agenda and an expression of public opinion to politics as a resonance for rational decision-making. Its procedural ideal is rational discourse of
argumentation and reasoning. It is primarily oriented towards homogeneity, focus and the political system. This dimension is at the centre of Habermas’ concern. Historically, the mass media has been a vital cause and effect of this differentiation of communication. In this context, they represent increasing complexity and contingency. However, equally important, the mass media generalise communication by allowing variation within certain standards or common denominators that transcend singular contexts. By applying recognisable genres and referring to a limited number of issues, communication and understanding becomes ‘less improbable’, to use the sociologist Niklas Luhmann’s phrase, by stabilising expectations. In this way, they reduce contingency, and in relation to political democracy they enable mutual observations between the public sphere and politics. This function of generalisation is predominantly effectuated in the presentational face of the public sphere.

INTERCONNECTIONS?

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

A dynamic relationship between the presentational and representational faces would imply that the public sphere serves its purpose as a political and cultural institution. Both dimensions serve basic functions to a democracy that depends on and appreciates both efficiency and diversity, both a strong public opinion, which
motivates politics on main concerns with the help of journalistic and entertainment techniques, and pluralistic and direct dialogue among its citizens. Diversity is increasingly important, not least because the mass media in most countries tend to be subject to concentration in large-scale media cartels. Conversely, a focused and mainstreamed public sphere could compensate for the complexity, extremity and intransparency of partial, issue-oriented, public contexts. Could we hope for such a mutually beneficial division of labour between the two dimensions?

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

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

In order to understand the interrelationships between the two faces of the public sphere as well as their connection to political democracy, Habermas’ two forms of discourse – the moral and ethical-existential – may be instructive, if we do not push it too far (Habermas 1996). The public sphere possesses two faces of similar kinds, which can be assumed analytically in order to understand its functions. We should see the public sphere as a medium between individual voices of a public on the one hand, and the political apparatus on the other. The public sphere transforms and transfers individual opinion into public opinion for the political system to take into account. Realistically, it is hardly a question of a \textit{voluntas} becoming
transformed into a ratio, a consensus about what is practically necessary in the interest of all. It is rather a question of communicative selection according to the prevailing power relations. To carry out the task of providing an agenda for formal politics, the public sphere must front both the people and politics, by addressing problems and issues as both moral and ethical-existential, and juggling issues between the two. Whereas the moral discourse is directed to politics and common problems and alternative solutions, the ethical-existential discourse constitutes its social and cultural foundation, its reference background and test bed, its source for ideas and fresh thinking, with less conformity and fewer constraints – discourse that is marked by open controversy, drama, agitation and passion. The ethical-existential discourse is more characterised by religious values and convictions, that tend to be selected away in more political contexts.

THE CASE OF EUROPE

In the light of the emergent interdependent world society, a question is whether a corresponding public sphere may emerge which can illuminate global problems, suggest ways out and legitimate political strategies. The Vietnam War was probably the first example of an incident that achieved global awareness, which contributed to bringing the war to an end. In the essay ‘The Post-National Constellation’, first published in 1998, Habermas argued that legitimation of a European Charter and its institutions could only come into being through a European party system, and then also, by a ‘pan-European political public sphere that presupposes a European civil society complete with interest groups, non governmental organizations, citizen’s movements, and so forth’ (Habermas 2001, 103). Then, Habermas argued that only transnational media could organise such a legitimising multivocal context. At this point, Habermas believed that the nation-specific public spheres could expand into ‘overlapping projects for a common political culture’. After all, Habermas argued, the citizens find themselves in a century-old common European culture with specific European experiences: ‘These experiences of successful forms of social integration have shaped the normative self-understanding of European modernity into an egalitarian universalism that can ease the transition to post-national democracy’s demanding contexts of mutual recognition for all of us – we, the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of a barbaric nationalism’ (Habermas 2001, 103).

Later, however, Habermas modified this, and acquired a less ambitious understanding of a European public sphere. Habermas considers a Europe-wide politi-
cal public sphere, ‘a communicative network extending across national boundaries and specializing in the relevant questions’ of high importance for generating a sense of European identity (Habermas 2009, 87). There is no reason, Habermas argues, why a sense of political solidarity should stop at the nation state borders and not fill the current empty shell of European citizenship with ‘an awareness that all European citizens now share the same fate?’ (Habermas 2009, 87). The challenge is that the European decision-making process must become visible and accessible nationally. Thus, a European public sphere can be established only in so far as the 28 national spheres become sensitive to one another. This means that the national mass media need to cover politics in other countries and in Brussels through reporting and commentary, in a way that citizens experience themselves as European citizens. Also, deliberative decision-making processes in a Europe-wide scope can only take place if arguments and opinions can be exchanged across national boundaries between public arenas. In this way, numerous publics can establish fluid networks of communication as a legitimising sounding board for European will-formation and governance. Also genuine European organisations (interest groups, parties) need to be established through mutual openness between the nation states.

The continuous democratic deficit in the EU is apparent and is followed by a number of crises that such a quasi-democracy is not equipped to deal with. The European parliament, particularly with extended powers, is not in the position to bring public scrutiny to the processes and policies of the Commission and the Council. The European parliament elects its representatives on the basis of national issues, and certainly, legitimacy of national government cannot be extended to their decisions in Brussels (Habermas 2009, 182). The national public spheres simply do not pay attention to international and EU issues. Therefore, when EU directives are received in member states for implementation, they tend to appear as interventions from another political power. Habermas no longer argues for an overarching European public sphere in one language, with its own media (Habermas 2009, 88). This notion, Habermas now admits, is misleading and unrealistic. Rather, the aim is a process of transnationalisation of public spheres. What is needed, according to Habermas, is not another multi-lingual layer of communication on top of the national public spheres. Rather, Habermas thinks, the way ahead is a transnationalisation of the current national public spheres, where each becomes more responsive to one another (Habermas 2009, 183). Habermas seems to have quality newspapers in mind when he stresses the international exchange journalistic content to expose and compare the treatment of issues in different member states.
Research by Bernhard Peters (2004) showed that national newspapers increasingly cover EU politics, European institutions and the EU in general, but the increase is slow. In relation to a common European identity, ‘we’ references are modest. When it appears, we may add, it seems to be in connection with economic and social crises. All in all, national public spheres resist Europeanisation. Peters concluded that, in fact what occurs is more Americanisation than Europeanisation, suggesting that the presentational dimension of a European public sphere is underdeveloped. Although a broad representational dimension has emerged through a multitude of local media and digital fora in this wealthy corner of the world, the EU as a singular political project will have major problems as long as a European public opinion cannot be identified through a presentational dimension to balance and synthesise the representational diversity.

The need for a unified sphere of legitimacy for European political power was only a distant vision until supra-national power based on democratic principles was introduced in Europe. With the establishment of the European Union, supra-national power addresses, so far without success, supra-national legitimacy. Politically and culturally, Europe remains a space of nation states, nations and regions, each with its national public sphere and, as Habermas argues, a European public sphere can only emerge if these become responsive to one another (Habermas, 2008: 87, 183). Indeed, economic and scientific integration (as well as integration of arts, sports and religion) have hardly, since the Second World War, been accompanied by the constitution of a common European public opinion. Rather we have seen a number of new regional political territories and their corresponding environments of political communication. Add to this a mixture of media types, media organisations, languages, themes and conflicts, and we have a rough sketch of extremely complex networks of public communication. Although there are overlapping agendas, international circulation of some quality newspapers, coverage of international events and international NGOs, a contemporary European public sphere can hardly be imagined, not even in a soft, weak-tie sense. European public opinions can, at best, be detected as occasionally overlapping complex networks of topics and viewpoints circulating as multiple voices on local, national and international scales.

True enough, diversity itself does not prevent an international public sphere from realising itself because the term ‘public’ refers not to media technologies nor to language – but focused, political communication. In spite of the necessity of a converging and unifying presentational dimension of a public sphere, the absence of common European media and a lingua franca may not be an absolute obstacle – it only means that a limited number of national media may serve the presenta-
tional function for the EU political elite. It also requires more cultural and linguistic effort for issues and viewpoints to circulate and converge through the multitude of mass media and digital media. Nor is a community with unifying values an absolute requirement. Habermas (2008) has argued that a post-national discourse is possible, which takes difference into account. Contrary to communitarian perspectives associated with a strong notion of community, a deliberative, network-oriented public sphere consists of a multitude of interconnected webs of communicative flows, reproduced by different groups, issues, genres and media, indirectly laying a foundation for solving mutual problems (Bohman and Rehg, 1997). In a Habermasian view of a deliberative public sphere, issues, solutions and problems are confronted with each other and tested through a self-improving process of open opinion formation. The distinction between public and not-public communication is reproduced by deliberation itself. Potentially, a minimal, but sufficient sense of collective identity, a sense of ‘us’, emerges from such communication, supporting and reproducing further deliberation. Legitimacy is produced not so much by the quantity of participation as by the diversity and integration of meaning. That is why an essentially male-dominated and bourgeois public sphere could serve progressive reform (Habermas, 1989, 2005).

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the ‘political public sphere’ should be understood as referring not to ‘who’ but to ‘how’ – in other words, to a distributed space that is the medium for, and produced by, public communication, where the public more or less overtly dedicates its statements and arguments to specific political institutions. A public sphere can be understood as circulations of public issues; as interconnected topics and debates with some collective value and consequence. To examine the European public sphere, research needs to focus less on participation and more on the translations, interconnections and conflicts between media and agendas in Europe. The question is whether what I have called the presentational dimension can be fulfilled satisfactorily through such inter-media responsiveness. It is not likely that genuine ‘European media’, will emerge on any significant scale, and a European public sphere cannot rely on the development of such overarching arenas. There will be no BBC for the EU. Only traces of a European public sphere can be identified in an indirect, network-oriented sense – not as a supra-national sphere, but as a multitude of mediated and unmediated discursive processes aimed at opinion formation at various levels, interconnected directly and indirectly.
What could be a “European public sphere” in the future is currently a complex network of observations of discourses, media and audiences. It is the very complexity of all these connections that potentially informs various discourses with new insights and possible solutions. In such an indirect and contingent way, European publics receive and contribute to international opinion formation. But how formal politics can steer this public ‘will’ without a common and focused media remains a central challenge for democratic politics. For the present, the primary references for communication will probably remain close to immediate concerns about lifeworld issues like employment, personal economy, children or the local environment. What can be identified through media analysis is a secondary self-reference concerning the conditions and future of Europe, just as we can see even stronger secondary references to global concerns of climate change threats. Citizens of the EU have only national, segmented and topical zones of what may be elements of a more robust European public sphere in the future. And thus far, despite growing and widespread concern about the current crisis (and hence increasing debate about common concerns), these zones form fragile and unstable European publics, only indirectly and unintentionally oriented towards an integrated will formation in Europe. One realistic way ahead for a multi-mediated European public sphere is to encourage Internet-based interconnections between non-commercial organisations, movements and associations of all sorts in order to make circulation of meaning in Europe more dense and robust. Such a public sphere must also recognise the existence of conflict and disagreement as being productive for a common political frame.

ACCOUNTABILITY DEFICIT

The main obstacle for a European public sphere is however political and institutional. For social media and mass media to supplement one another, they must function as resonance vis-à-vis accountable, linguistically understandable, and locally relevant formal responsibilities. National (and municipal) governments and parliaments are therefore critical for functioning public spheres – given that they are not emptied of too much of their authority. National elected bodies provide public debate with topics, attitudes and motivations, since their existence and logic depends fundamentally on a national cultural, historical and political context. If one thinks that public opinion plays a significant role in the formation of democratic politics, the point would be to enhance the capacity national parliaments to make legitimate judgements and decisions on national and European
matters. Because public opinion operates on a national (and local) level, European cooperation can only operate on the same level in order to benefit from political opinion-formation in all media. For a Europe of sovereign nation states, a viable public sphere is possible in a loose or weak sense. Because of liberalist visions of the EU elites, that is however not a likely development in the near future. The shift towards ever-growing transnational commitment in all sectors of society requires not more democracy, understood as participation from below. Rather it requires stability through a variety of hard and soft measures. Today, Europeans are stuck with a neo-liberal and quasi-democratic empire that mobilises culture and science in inventing democratic narratives about itself. The allocation of funding to research (such as Horizon 2020) and arts for ideological purposes has been considerable, although the effect is unknown.

For the union to survive and to integrate further according to the visions of the elites, it prefers to be narrated (through social research, culture, political rhetoric) as a democratic project, at the same time as its central institutions (Council, Parliament, Commission, Central Bank, Court of Justice) are protected from legitimacy tests. Public opinion and its media play a significant role in generating legitimacy as well as in limiting the absence of legitimacy. Massive protests have targeted national governments and yet they rarely disturb the policies of Brussels. The political need for input legitimacy through a public sphere and representative channels is often overrated, and so also in the relation to the supra-national European democracy. Whereas a social-democratic view in the 1990s was that EU needed a ‘social dimension’ to ensure EU economic policies, this social-democratic alibi is no longer credible and has long since been thrown overboard. Policies adapting to neo-liberal market thinking can without too many complications be linked to central EU institutions, provided basic questions are out of range for electoral and discursive action.

The problem of the European project is that it escalated its ambitions from the Europe of nations and the corresponding national public spheres. The idea of national unity and national citizenship was seen as an obstacle more than a foundation for a greater European constellation. Rather to some, the national in cultural and political contexts was either a recent (and therefore trivial) innovation, a Mythos, or an expression of reactionary nationalism. The idea of Europe as a constellation of national democracies had to undermine itself because it could not be harmonised with an even more powerful idea: the liberalist idea of the single market. Due to such flawed ideas about the European nation and its languages, cultures, democratic ways and currencies, the European community was faced with an acute and enduring problem of not only how to bear various crises, but how to
legitimise its centralised ideas about the European construction. The EU’s endemic legitimacy problems – considerably enlarged with the series of crises since 2008 – are not a problem that was created or could be solved in the public sphere, but it is a mirror of how legitimacy and delegitimacy appear and magnify themselves.
Chapter 7

Communication and political disenchantment

‘In fact you may say that idealism is the ruin of man, and if we lived down to fact, as primitive man had to do, we would be better off.’

James Joyce

From the latter half of the eighteenth century, public opinion appears as the invisible hand of politics, the real sovereign. One speaks about the esprit public and the opinion as the business of human reason. For politics, public opinion (öffentliche Meinung) becomes the functional equivalent of political truth and this fact provides the justification for freedom of speech and the press, and ultimately for the rationality of politics (Luhmann 2002, 280). As a political environment, as a manifestation of a volonté générale, public opinion assists political differentiation towards an autonomous social system. In the nineteenth century, it became fully loaded as a value-laden concept, and serves the building of the democratic nation state and its elections – and constructs itself politically in between the elections, through provocations and debate, to test the freedom of speech. It establishes itself on the basis of press freedom from the self-made conviction that it can influence elections and subsequently politics. The public facticity of newspapers has added authority to the editors and their moral criticism of political immorality from liberal, conservative and socialist perspectives. The notion of a critical public sphere has manifested itself as an idea (Luhmann 2002, 283).

How did sociology and political theory position themselves to the ideas of political modernity? Sociology and related social sciences are not seen, and rarely see themselves, as normative disciplines. Sociology normally abstains from recom-

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mending prescriptions for particularly good or just forms of democracy, because that would place sociology in a too obviously paradoxical situation. Weber wisely insisted on value-freedom as the prime methodological aim of sociology. The contribution of sociology in relation to the established Enlightenment political thought was to observe norms and values as inherent in sociological problems, as facts, not to enter into debate with them. However, such an analytical-descriptive ethos in sociology is nevertheless embedded in Enlightenment ideas of the good and just society. Particularly political sociology works in a tension between analysis and normativity. As a product of observation (reflexivity) and idealism, sociology is in the business of non-moralising and moralising at the same time.

This analytical – normative paradox has been with sociology since its inception and cannot be done away with. It is however handled in several ways, predominantly by emphasising the analytical-empirical dimension and by discursively trying to hold this separate from the moral values and ideals of modernity. And yet discourses on democracy, liberalism and human rights enforce themselves even more strongly on the agenda of the social sciences on the background of threats and challenges against these conceptions in a multi-religious and globalised society. At the centre of the debate stands the public and discursive foundation of political authority, normally conceived as a question of legitimacy generated in the public sphere. Public reason is seen as the social structure of liberalism – the concept that distinguishes liberalism from all other orders and which positions different variants of liberal thought. Political sociology is thus a paradoxical science in that it unavoidably describes and at the same time produces norms. It needs, as all academic activity, to be well aware of this paradoxical position, and to handle it accordingly.

In this chapter, I sketch out what I consider a realist position, particularly as opposed to theories of public reason. I address what the realist tradition has to offer liberalism in general, and to notions of the public sphere.

Realism moves beyond the approaches of public reason in order to establish greater distance from the idealist and moralist perspectives on political society, which accept and work from the inherent democratic potential of politics. It formulates a set of immanent critiques against mainstream liberalism, particularly the Kantian and neo-Kantian sorts. The realist counter-current at, for instance, Harvard in the 1960s and later at Oxford and Cambridge, took place within a larger liberal wave, that now has washed away most other competitive political orders. The task of political realism, I argue, is to move liberal political theory away from

2. For a discussion of the normativity of sociology, see Ashenden 2010.
certain idealist deficiencies and back on a Weberian track. In order to understand contemporary politics as well as the Internet as a political infrastructure, I argue for a kind of disenchanted liberalism, a liberal realism as a foundation for political sociology that can provide a better view of those problems that politics and its media confront. The term political realism also marks the distance between those who associate realism with a one-sided pursuing of narrow self-interest and those who reject not only moralism, but morality as such in political thought. Realism stresses that there is a political morality.

Against the prevailing account of legitimacy as public reason, I have in this book presented alternative contestation-oriented views that see moral justification tending towards universality as highly unlikely and certainly unnecessary conditions for establishing legitimate constitutional regimes, and similarly, that law is not in any absolute need of such a consensual foundation. However, clarifying the conditions of legitimacy, such as the nature of mediated public discourse, remains one of the most central tasks for political sociology. For a conventional liberalist, legitimacy refers to the authority of the sovereign and how it commands the executives and legislators. For a realist, the problem of legitimacy addresses how politics creates order out of ‘chaos’. For a liberalist, legitimacy is a moral concern that connects political decisions to democracy. This is the preferable version to politicians themselves. It is no coincidence that mainstream political figures today prefer to speak of democracy rather than politics. To the realist, however, legitimacy is to a large degree self-legitimation; it is about how to make politics, including how to decide what politics is. Opinion polls and Internet-based media do not change this. Legitimacy is the magic of getting the applause even if what you did was only a trick, or even, attracting applause even if everyone realises that it is a trick. The functional trick of producing expectations goes right to heart of ‘the political’. Politics exists because we cannot do without it – because when it stops functioning, war and chaos take over.

Another difference between conventional liberalism and realism is that the latter tends to be sceptical to the claim that civil conversation is inherent in politics. Clearly, to what extent one emphasises disagreement and struggle is a matter of degree, and most decisions in contemporary democracies would have the shape of compromise or even modus vivendi. Everyone involved would, regardless of actual results, have achieved order, and they all expect more in coming rounds. On the other hand, the argument about politics as conflict, hammered in by the contestation-oriented approach and Weber, assumes that one has discovered some deep secret in language, and has come up with the opposite conclusion than Habermas about communication and the future; public communication is inher-
ently irrational: It differentiates and polarises, dismantles argumentation into fragments, reduces discussions to hate speech. Contestation-theorists have yet to show convincing evidence for this. As I have noted in the discussion on empirical studies, findings go in different directions, in fact supporting my claim that the Internet is neither an undemocratic nor asocial technology, nor is it inherently democratic – or neutral. In fact, contrary to what the contestation perspective argues, the debate about consensus versus conflict can be shown not to be of essential importance. What to expect from a political debate in the public opinion or in formal politics must always remain open. Political decisions can resolve or create conflict: they can resolve some and at the same time create new ones; they can create hope and disillusionment. In most cases, the political process just goes on. To build a political theory on either consensus or conflict is therefore misguided.

A liberal understanding of the public sphere begins, as we have seen, with a normative understanding of democracy rather than a cool-eyed understanding of politics. What is needed is theoretical guidance that can lead to the construction of ideal types rather than ideals of politics and its media. Assumptions about the inherent democratic potential of the Internet have little place in such theory. Notions of democratic discourse must at least be balanced by a view on pervasive surveillance and central control.

NO MORE SPACE FOR IDEALISM

As we have seen, the deliberative model argues that political institutions cannot simply mirror the interests of the represented. It assumes that people’s views are less tightly connected to particular interests, and more to the political debates they engage in, and likely to be modified during political discourse. Discourse is not only a question of representing and making present particular problems, because interests and opinions are never fixed. More than stating interests, deliberative theory argues, the task is to enter into open, inclusive and rational discourses, which build on common interests and advance and shape preferences, with the purpose of developing consensus or compromise. This perspective strongly emphasises the power of the argument; it is possible, not to mention probable, to transform opinions by changing how problems are interpreted and weighted against other problems in an intersubjective testing of reasons. In this perspective, legitimacy is not reproduced simply by making established interests visible in political fora, but by producing a common interest through free, equal and public argumentation (Hayward 2009, 120; Benhabib 1996; Elster 1998; Habermas 1990; Manin 1987). Dele-
gates represent interests of people as they probably would understand them after subjecting them to deliberation. Here the problem of the production of legitimacy in the public sphere is put to the centre of the question of democracy: According to the deliberative view, representation is a necessary but highly insufficient condition for democracy and legitimacy. Politics is expected to handle political challenges as a totality. Representatives do not only represent particular groups, they are representatives of society as a whole, and if successful, both particular issues and the political system in total, benefit from trust and belief in the system.

Thus the public reason approach tends to explain oppression and conflict as obstacles that can be argued away during political procedure. Procedure is described as absent from dominance and privileges, as if everyone stands on an equal footing in opinion-formation and policy-making. Typically, oppression and dominance are recognised only as an effect that will change in the course of discourse. In a reform-oriented spirit, the elimination of dominance and coercion are stated as conditions for moral-political discourses to work productively. Politics thus reforms itself in a virtuous circle toward constantly improved conditions for public discourse. Rawls and Habermas, in spite of differences, both represent this general idealist model. They do not inscribe injustice into their models as anything else than as a topic for discourse. By this, the theories not only distance themselves as descriptions of actual politics, they produce an image of politics that is primarily helpful for those in power, such as social-democratic and Christian-democratic politicians, for whom ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, which again implies ‘will’ (‘when we come into government’). The implied utopian ideal follows everyday statements about how things ought to be.

One cannot expect differently from politics – presenting visions is a part of the political rhetoric. However, political theory is expected to observe this from a distance and to analyse it within its political context. When it does not, it may serve as ideology. Charles W. Mills argues (alluding to Rawls) that ideal theory presents a ‘distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the non-representative interest and experiences of a small minority of the national population – middle-to-upper-class white males – who are hugely over-represented in the professional philosophical profession’ (Mills 2005, 172). They abstract away from sociological realities like class, gender and race. The alternative found in materialism and realism from Machiavelli to Nietzsche is to grasp moral and ideal theory in political and social contexts as phenomena that are not given, but to be explained. In a realist manner, Mills argues that: ‘[T]he best way to bring about the ideal is by recognising the non-ideal, and [that] by assuming the ideal or the near-ideal, one is only guaranteeing the perpetuation of the non-ideal’ (Mills 2005, 182).
In Rawls’ defence, one could respond that he did not intend a sociological analysis of the US, but rather to excavate an old philosophical tradition and situate it in the late twentieth century US. Rawls did not try to examine actual political processes, but describe a regulatory ideal against which existing political arrangements could be measured. Even as such a benchmark, however, it may be argued that the concept of overlapping consensus had little to offer. It did not take into account necessary aspects of any political arrangement. Rawls insists that this concept is a moral conception based on equally moral and reasonable reasons. Precisely as a regulatory moral ideal, it may legitimate arguments that are really expressions of strategic power. Following realism, the result in Rawls is peculiarly apolitical: The purpose is to constrain politics morally by ‘identifying a core set of political liberties and depoliticizing all decision-making that touches on them’ (Bellamy 2010, 420). Politics is squeezed between legal procedures and rights on the one hand, and cultural pluralism on the other. Rawls in fact makes a point of removing controversial issues from the political agenda, in order to ease the public reason from the ‘burden of judgement’ in processes of social cooperation. For instance, to Rawls, the abortion issue is foremost a difficult issue that must be handled morally in a way that considers all relevant sides according to the norms given by public reason. It is not allowed to appear as a subject of deep political and moral conflict, which needs to be handled politically. There are specific constraints, historically developed in and through the development of democratic politics that would be decisive in a question like that. If Rawls had accepted historically produced expressions of strategic compromises and similar non-moral arrangements as elements in the concept of overlapping consensus, the ideological effect had been avoided.

POLITICAL ACTION AND JUDGEMENT

Political realism advances the claim that political philosophy must be realist in the sense that it must concern itself with how actual institutions operate in society at a given time, and what really moves individuals to act in given circumstances. Here ideals and motivations are of interest to the extent that they actually influence behaviour. What is of interest is not ideals and utopias as such, but what agents do and how imaginations play a political role here and now. Moreover, political philosophy must recognise that politics is about human action and its historical contexts, not only about beliefs, propositions and principles. Also, politics has similarities to the exercise of a craft or art. As a skill or craft, politics should be studied as
practices, not as a set of principles or theories. Often their successes is conceived of as ‘political judgement’ – among other things ‘the ability to determine which analogies are useful, which theories abstract from crucial aspects of the situation’ (Geuss 2008, 98). Geuss recommends a return from neo-Kantianism to ‘neo-Leninism’. We may add that politics is characterised by bounded rationality – filled with moral intentions, and more or less sound judgements, confused or conflicting beliefs and desires. Often, policies are only locally consistent, half-baked and indeterminate, but nevertheless able to achieve stability (Geuss 2008, 4). Politics may be rational in that it may learn from previous failures, but it may also not learn, or draw lessons that may later prove fatal. The imperfection of politics prevents us from speaking confidently of learning processes as a general rule (Geuss 2008, 5).

Raymond Geuss argues that realism implies ‘that one does not think about politics in terms of general moral categories or vague aspirational concepts like ‘freedom,’ and democracy. Rather the analysis begins by, as Max Weber taught us, observing action and its (unintended) consequences. Political judgment is always embedded in a context of action’ (Geuss 2010, 5). Politics unfolds in interaction between individuals involved in political matters who may have different and contradictory powers and agendas. Similarly to Weber, Geuss notes the aspect of power in attempts to control the actions of others on the basis of actions and positions in the past. Underlying issues are adjustments to new challenges as well as consistency over time. To speak of political judgement alone is therefore an abstraction, ‘an artificial isolation of one element from a wider complex of actions and action-related attitudes, habits, and institutional arrangements, within which alone the judgement (finally) makes sense’ (Geuss 2010, 8).

Nevertheless, politics is also a question of demonstrating human capacities or virtues in public (Dunn 2000, 42). There are shifts in political engagements and consequences according to persona and habitus. Consider the different styles of government between Margaret Thatcher and John Major, or (in Norway) Thorbjørn Jagland and Jens Stoltenberg. We need to recognise and learn about the fact that the meaning of politics lies partly in the simple fact of personality, for example personal religious faith. Political judgement is a product of immediate incidents and statements and long-term developments, of past and future, of morality and efficiency. Weber’s two political ethics’ and his notion of Augenmaß account for this in enlightening ways.

Deeds speak louder and clearer than arguments. Wittgenstein, Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss all refer to Goethe’s Faust who refuses to translate the first sentence of St. John’s Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word’, but rather as Im Anfang war die Tat. For politics in Williams’s interpretation, this means that
theory can only change political ideas and action ‘by virtue of the historical situation in which it is presented, and its relation to that historical situation cannot be fully theorized or captured in reflection’ (Williams 2005, 25). Geuss argues with late Wittgenstein and sociological insight: ‘Agents [who] have interests, powers and beliefs. Social life is the action and the results of the action of agents and groups of agents who have various powers, and develop and exercise these powers, through time in the pursuit of their interests, and in accordance with various beliefs they have, including perhaps what we would call “moral” beliefs’ (Geuss 2010, 50). Politics ought to be understood as a “conjunction of different actors making context-specific judgments, taking advantage of unexpected opportunities, and innovating” (Geuss 2010, 51). Bernard Williams also makes clear that political action is only in part influenced by intentions. Human action involves a set of factors influencing its results, and we may add, often the results cannot be isolated from the results of other’s actions. Therefore, human action is not the mastery of the agent although it is often celebrated as such. Williams (2005) calls this, on the basis of Weber, non-sovereign agency.

These are well-known sociological facts for a complex society that do not fit well with Kantian ethics where normative judgements rest on principles. The notion of non-sovereign agency addresses our vulnerability as agents and our dependency on other in completing our actions. Max Weber notes that the political ethics of responsibility account for results as well as possible unintended consequences. The ethics of responsibility stress the importance of the fact that action is always entangled in other events and acts, and that this must be carefully accounted for. Universal principles such as human rights are indispensable but do not necessarily account for political answers to practical problems (Galston 2010, 396). Rights and principles are referred to selectively and pragmatically in politics. Difference and political conflict is ineradicable. The complex tension between disagreement and conflict of interest, and the interest in stabilisation is the enduring duality that characterises politics, and which is strategically used by politics to preserve and legitimate power.

Politics, writes John Dunn, ‘is a combat among teams, of constantly changing membership, profoundly undependable commitment and often blatantly faltering grasp of what is going on’ (Dunn 2000, 192). It is ‘the balance of conflict and cooperation between human purposes on any scale on which you look at it’ (Dunn 2000, 361). Politics is a contest for power (Chantal Mouffe) but it is also about order, which means that the prime challenge for politics is to handle, and contain, and stabilise conflict, often in a modus vivendi, compromise, contracts, bargaining procedures, multi-party systems, division of power procedures, symbolic pol-
itics, etc. In societies where individuals and groups have something to lose, mutual accommodation is generally an acceptable price to pay for stability.

**BEYOND POLITICS AS APPLIED MORALITY**

In Rawls and Habermas, counterfactual and reconstructive methodologies are essential to build a model by which society can measure and criticize itself. They produce a theory of morality and law, (validity and facticity, fairness and constitution) where constitution and law protect moral reasoning, and reversibly, public moral reasoning ultimately leads to reforms of law. These impressive frameworks are presented as moral theories of politics or rather, of democracy (Rossi 2012, 149). This principle was laid in Enlightenment philosophy from Kant, Rousseau and Locke. Politics is seen as macro-ethics or political ethics. Politics, they argue, must be understood by the general moral theory of justice.

Realism replies to this is that if theory silences or ignores the non-moral dimension of politics, it does not understand the practice of real politics. Rather than seeing politics as a continuation of ethics, politics replaces general ethics; it intervenes at the point of disagreement on the right thing to do. It is an old truth that to invest morality into a political conflict is to ask for even more trouble. Conflicts need to be considered and handled responsibly and politically. One might say with Glen Newey (2001, 169) that politics is the public decision-making mechanism deployed when justification gives out. As Newey (2001, 168) argues, moral commitments, in discussions, are better seen as outputs from discussion, than inputs to it. The use of disagreement and power cannot be decided on morally, before, or outside politics, because they themselves are political matters. If rational discourses work productively, politics may already have done its job.

That politics are some sort of applied ethics means that one begins an analysis of politics with a moral ideal, as if ethics holds a separate analytic position from which one could assess politics. Raymond Geuss argues, ‘The assumption is that one can complete the works of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents’ (Geuss 2008,8). But no such universal and ahistorical place exists apart from empirical circumstances.

However, ‘values’, moral principles, or ideals, are certainly more than window dressing. Political action is, among other things, inherently moral. There is after all, something we call political responsibility. Max Weber, in his talk and essay on politics as profession, left insights about politics that should serve as a reminder:
To Weber, politics remained the art of the possible, not the art of the impossible as in moral liberalism. Politics involves deciding the place of morality in decisions according to responsibilities and convictions.

Toleration may be seen as another political value. According to John Gray, ‘Liberalism contains two philosophies. In one, toleration is justified as a means to truth. In this view, toleration is an instrument of rational consensus, and a diversity of ways of life is endured in the faith that it is destined to disappear. In the other, toleration is valued as a condition of peace, and divergent ways of living are welcomed as marks of diversity in the good life. The first conception an ideal of ultimate convergence on values, the latter an ideal of modus vivendi’ (Gray 2000, 103). Following Gray, the future of liberalism lies in turning toward the second interpretation of toleration as a circumstantial balance of powers. The way forward for any competent political regime is to accommodate political interests, to negotiate and mediate conflicting values, to facilitate compromises. It cannot defend itself with a theory of justice, because justice is a part of politics. When a regime argues with universal principles like human rights, it also applies well-known conventions as ammunition in a controversy.

John Horton too suggests that the old idea of modus vivendi (including compromise, bargaining, persuasion and more) is a more convincing way of thinking about political stability both theoretically and realistically, than compliance and other terms that indicate moral consensus. To count as a modus vivendi, an arrangement has to be broadly ‘acceptable’ or ‘agreeable’ to those who are party to it, even if reluctantly and for diverse reasons. It is a practical settlement that instead of relying on general justification is simply accepted by drawing on resources of various kinds.

THE POLITICAL DOMAIN

Closely related to the question of morality is the realist assumption that the political constitutes an autonomous domain. Similar to Max Weber, Bernard Williams is among those who stress the specifically political as for instance in contrast to the democratic. Political agreement comes as a result of employment of political power in shaping society in modern ways. Williams argues that consensus is an ‘artefact’ of politics and cannot exist prior to the political, but is created through political intervention.

Similarly, Philp (2010, 475) has argued for extracting what he calls political virtue as distinct from moral virtue. Politics requires its actors to act in ways that are
not always in accord with general moral values (lying, duplicity, declaring war). And conversely, some moral values are hardly political ones, such as modesty and generosity. While moral virtues are essential to all, political virtues belong to the domain of politics and the particular roles and relations of the political kind. Philp talks of political virtues rather than simply political skills and capacities, because of their potential deep impact on other’s lives. Political virtues deal with political activity as an agency of a particular kind and embedded in a particular moral and rhetorical context. Machiavelli and Weber have given us places to begin. It therefore makes sense to see how they reconstitute politics as an ethically and communicatively self-enclosed domain. The autonomy of politics can be delimited through the business of political coordination according to explicitly political norms. Another way is to point out that its ascribed task is to solve problems under the conditions of conflict, or where political capital is played out. Politics requires an explicitly political communication that is not just a derivative of judicial, economic or moral, religious or scientific forms.

Political sociology also operates with an analytical space for the distinct political. It needs to acknowledge politics as an autonomous domain that to a large extent dictates its own ways and laws. The concept of the political needs to be more specific and at the same time wider than in conventional liberal political theory: (1), narrower, in that it acknowledges the political to be where decision-making takes place (parties, advisors, administration, elected assemblies); (2), wider, in that it sees the need for extending the area of strategic political influence discussion to factors that influence politics at a given time, such as multinationals, the education system, lobbying, the media and public opinion. Conversely and just as importantly, it is essential to understand how politics acts out in these institutional domains in order to influence what is political, and how politics self-legitimises itself in the public sphere, through a wide variety of techniques and mechanisms addressed by sociology and media studies.

The important distinction between (in a narrow sense) politics and public opinion surrounding politics makes it easier to see how politics develops strategies for acquiring legitimacy. Since the birth of the modern nation state, and along with the development of procedures for making political decisions, mechanisms of justification have emerged as an internal dimension of the political domain. Efficiency and legitimacy became the two central features of politics. With the dramatic expansion of public bureaucracy and specialist knowledge, politicians were gradually relieved of the administrative dimension strongly connected to efficiency. Today, generating legitimacy in public opinion is the chief task of any leading politician. As they no doubt would affirm in moral terms without hesitation: It is
a duty and responsibility for any leading politician to do what she can to gather support for her policies, party, government and constitution.

POLITICAL IDEALISM AS IDEOLOGY

In spite of their very different styles and routes, Rawls and Habermas both describe an ordered and pleasant landscape that could have been possible, and, according to both theories, still is possible to reach or at least to approach considerably. In contrast, realism holds that there is no reason to believe that political reality and liberalist utopias will ever meet. Therefore, it is a danger that the theories may function as what Raymond Geuss calls ideological interventions (2008, 94). Political philosophy can either play a critical role in unmasking ideological illusions, or it may itself play an ideological role in that it in various ways supports certain ideological illusions. In the latter case, it diverts attention by presenting marginal issues as if they are central and essential.

For instance, Geuss criticises Rawls for delivering an idealised notion of politics that begins with an abstract analysis of a conception of political virtue or rationality, and then making it into a theory of a society where the rationality or virtue is fully realised. In Geuss’ words: liberal moralists try to “‘blank out history, sociology, and the particularities that constitute the substance of any recognisable form of human life’ (Geuss 2008, 59–60). The absence of a discussion of power, and in fact the drawing away of attention from power makes the theory appear ideological: ‘In real politics, theories like that of Rawls are nonstarters, except of course as potential ideological interventions. A theoretical approach with no place for a theory of power is not merely deeply deficient but actively pernicious, because mystifying’ (Geuss 2008, 94). This, writes Geuss, is a critique not of particular aspects of his theory, but of ‘his whole way of approaching the subject of political philosophy’ (Geuss 2008, 94).

Theories of deliberative democracy tend to describe political reality, according to its vocabulary, as liberal, rational and ordered – imperfect, but nevertheless deliberative and democratic. It presents actual politics as public, rational and deliberative procedurally-based politics. Their contributions have tended to slide from the theoretically normative to the actual descriptive. In the words of the Weberian scholar Wilhelm Hennis: ‘It always goes the same boring way. First it is a metaphor, then an analogy, and then finally it is reified and taken for the thing itself. And that becomes simply stupid and very often dangerous…’ (Hennis 2009, 119–20). By basing their relative mainstream descriptions of democracy on ideal
assumptions, these assumptions may be taken for actuality, or close to what exists. There is nothing wrong with utopias in themselves, Raymond Geuss argues. The problem is that they become ideologies; they naturalise and even idealise a condition that politics and society can never achieve.

Political theory as ideology is a dimension of the legitimacy of politics that political sociology can address, as a feature of the current political self-identity and a mechanism of its self-legitimation. In other words, Rawls and Habermas serve as expressions of the Western liberal self-conception, as crucial legitimating resources for society (Thornhill 2011, 155). A non-normative or a differently normative approach may examine just how modern societies account for, and legitimise their political functions in normative ways, by ways of political theory, precisely what Habermas did in the Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit.

Political realism may on the other hand seem as an Anti-illusionist, disenchanted tradition – it attempts to move between moralism and cynicism, close to a common-sense understanding of political leadership and statesmanship. It is deeply concerned about how moral integrity can survive in the political arena, and it has no profound or fundamental answer to such questions. Realism argues quite strongly that politics is proactive: Political institutions participate in forming the public opinion in a wide range of ways. As Roberto Michels, Max Weber and many since have demonstrated, political institutions like political parties and public bureaucracies develop according to an inner logic by way of instrumental and symbolic features that assist in the self-legitimation of politics. Institutions also contain political conflict by forcing people and groups of very different views to cooperate under the recognition that the second best is better than chaos.

A normative concept of justice of the kind I have criticised cannot serve as the test of legitimacy of a policy, a regime or a constitution. Rather political theory needs to take a step back and ask how legitimacy is constituted, how politics publicly cultivates itself. Its reading of classical theory as well as current political reality is that legitimacy may not be about justice and there may not be a question of true justification involved. Rather, politics initiates overt and covert influence on the public and forms the process of self-legitimation as an inherent dimension of developing forming and presenting politics.

PUBLIC SPACE ACCORDING TO POLITICAL REALISM

Two rival perspectives see politics very differently: The idealist public use of reason, versus ‘the political’, and its use of public communication. The first perspec-
tive has Kantian roots, while the second has Machiavellian and Hobbesian roots. The second one, I have argued, is a closer relative of sociology than the first. Political realist theory and political philosophy address historical-political variability, political context and its limited rationality. It tries to understand the lifeworld of decision-makers. Political sociology moves closer to the events, and transforms them into cases for empirical examination. Realist political theory and political sociology both observe politics and its morality from outside. In the public space, politics is made public, and so is the response of the individuals who are organised into the constellation we call a public sphere. It remains with the first analysis of the public sphere by Jürgen Habermas but develops it in another, and less idealistic direction than Habermas himself did. Then public reason remains an idea, which serves the self-legitimation of politics as a moral procedure, which sociology needs to see through. Pierre Bourdieu (2014, 61) once noted in a lecture on politics in 1990 that the modern notion of public opinion conceals a latent meaning, ‘that public opinion is the opinion of those who deserve to have an opinion. There is a kind of qualified definition of public opinion as enlightened opinion, as opinion that deserves the name.’ Too many scholars think that this fundamentally changes with the introduction of the Internet, web and social media, just as democracy was seen as energised by opinion polls after the Second World War. However, mediatisation goes both ways. Public opinion or public spheres are also about constituting constellations of conformity or structured disagreements with the assistance of rhetoric, signs, figures, stories and imaginations that may shape the understanding of an (often given) set of problems and topics. Did the extraordinarily extensive catalogue of such techniques of manufacturing opinion slip away as a consequence of our one-eyed interest in reason and argumentation?

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AS TOPICS

There is a preference for conflict in both politics and the media. Several possibilities for agreement may never be discovered by public opinion. But at the same time, these conflicts are contained in the relationship between political position and opposition, and the plurality of stable party organisations. Through the styles and agenda-setting of journalism, conflicts are made public and stable. Politics and journalism do not simply attract conflict; they attract certain conflicts, clarify the issue, and order the opinions along axes of conflict. Long-term conflict-oriented themes structure politics and bring a certain foreseeability to it. This, in Luhmannian terms ‘selective variability’, provides legitimacy by allowing for
criticism and protest under conditions that are acceptable for political stability. This improves the ability of politics to handle conflicts through binding decisions or individual innovative efforts on the part of political talents. We do not need a moral theory of politics to understand this.

Public opinion also, particularly with the help of journalism, applies schemas or scripts. It constitutes a common memory and consequently is a place for forgetting. The connection to democracy lies not in the construction of reasoned dialogues, but in making way for a controlled but open future ready for new distinctions and decisions with new limitations and possibilities. Public opinion points out politically relevant problems, open for new possibilities and solutions, and builds opinion. It encourages a culture of opposition, which enables the democratic and peaceful exchange between government and opposition. Public opinion never decides what opinions are true or just. It forms meanings that are temporary. Its critical questions hold validity only for a period of time before new questions take their place. This ability to constantly renew its critical potential reproduces topics and contributions to on-going debates. It relies, as does news journalism, on actuality, which constantly opens for new topics, views, problems and solutions.

From the point of view of sociology and media studies, the concept of public opinion refers to the constitution, circulation and fragmentation, in other words, the acceptance of topics (Luhmann 2007, 12–15). Topics are communication that refers to what are then accepted as problems and solutions in a relatively concentrated or fixed fashion. They substantiate and name social phenomena in order to attach opinions to them and otherwise communicate about them. And conversely, communication produces substantiation.

Topics or issues produce attention, expressions and publication, and temporary reproduction of themselves before they differentiate or evaporate. Opinion converges or diverges around topics according to the rhetorical and other forms of power applied by the individual and institutional participants, as well as by the technological features of the media. Issues and agendas are the structure of public communication and enable interaction, possibly a sense of solidarity.

With the Internet, the ability to construct topics from everyday problems and problems from the social periphery has rapidly increased. In contrast to the national mass media, no problem is too small to constitute an issue. With the Internet, the public opinion has approached the lifeworlds of ordinary individuals and their roles as patients, clients, consumers and students. From this communicative undergrowth of the Internet, the mass media may select and elaborate topics – from which politics in its turn makes its selections, in its ways. Conversely, polit-
ical candidates apply mass media as well as the Internet to induce their issues and opinions as effectively as possible into public opinion.

Circulations of topics are occasionally, particularly in accord with the theory of deliberative democracy, described as purification and moralisation of topics, leading to an increasingly decent reasoning. This is how the concept of the public sphere is put into action in order to solve the democratic paradox that Rousseau was the first to struggle with, the people that rules itself. Again, this is a misplaced attempt to minimise the difference between reality and Enlightenment ideas. It is to confuse politics with democracy. The point of topics is not to generate reason but to generate attention. There is no contradiction between communication and strategy.

**SELF-REFERENTIALITY**

Action-oriented approaches of both deliberative and contestation-oriented kinds may have problems in grasping the self-referentiality of public opinion. The contestation approach will tend to explain participation and communication in terms of action, personal ambition, will to power and motivation. Beyond the micro-level however, this approach tends to lose track of the complexity involved. The language of action and motivation, etc. needs to be supplemented by a focus on social structure; on selections of communication.

Less and less is politics able to provide necessary decisions by itself, and turns to the national or international legal system, or must consult public opinion in the search for political themes. With the emerging public opinion in the eighteenth century, politics achieved a greater degree of freedom to relate rationally to expectations in its political environment. As Luhmann formulates the current situation: ‘Politics must dance on the screen of political opinion’ (Luhmann 2013, 115). Politics turns to each citizen during general elections, but normally to public opinion. Public opinion is the replacement for the people, its functional substitute, for which politics arranges itself in a good manner. Politicians and their advisors observe how political issues are, and ought to be, observed by the public. Political rationality is the ability to account for aspects in the environment (Luhmann 2013, 136).

The response on the part of the audience is the modern, critical attitude, in part known from science, which is *half believing* to quote Bernard Williams: ‘It would not be right to say that when one takes the view of these people that is offered in the media, one does not believe in them. One believes in them as one believes in characters in a soap: one accepts the invitation to half believe in them’ (Williams 2005, 163). Similarly, Niklas Luhmann, in his book on the mass media, quotes
Horatio in Shakespeare’s Hamlet: ‘So have I heard and do in part believe it.’ This indicates that neither politics nor the media stand above one another with regard to status and authority.

A moral theory of the public sphere has the unrealistic ambition of formulating moral ideas for all domains or sectors of social life. It makes more sense to address politics as historical products of particular modern (Russia and China: non-modern) constellations, and to focus on consistency, institutional practices and their effects, the political development and use of morality, ways to formulate and see things, the application of power, responsibility, etc. The guiding question is: What is going on? How has what is considered reasonable or natural come to be seen as such? And as sociology often does, we may construct our types and concepts from actual practices we see unfolding. Critique is perfectly possible without a normative ideal as a beacon or standard.

The philosopher Michael Walzer once pointed out that fundamental moral dilemmas in political ethics cannot be dissolved, but they can be rendered legitimate by democratising the responsibility for their consequences. Political ethics is the process in which responsibility for negative consequences is distributed among all. That is probably what international politics is doing with the global climate problem. It uses its own specific political ethics to make the problem into a universal ethical one, which leaves the responsibility to all who have the right to vote and respond to legitimacy demands.

A theory that considers political mechanisms as applied morality stands in the danger of displacing itself from the map of the politically possible. Morality plays its role, but it cannot play out at the centre of a theory of politics, without blinding itself to a series of real-political elements of politics. To think politically, in Bernard Williams’s scheme, involves viewing arguments as historically conditioned, not as autonomous products of moral reason. (Williams 2005 13) What counts as acceptable, credible arguments changes continuously. And political convictions may have different (unintended and unrecognised) effects according to the circumstances.

In a non-normative or in a different normative sense, the public space is concerned with the maintenance and regulation of authority in Weber’s sense. The public sphere space or opinion is the locus of legitimacy and legitimation in order to secure the stability of the political regime or system, for the purpose of preserving stability. Rather than demonstrating empirically in what ways civil society and the public sphere live up to, (or rather fail to live up to) its critical, normative obligations, a realist theory of legitimacy accounts for how politics endemically seeks to generate what Weber called Legitimitäts-Glaube by intervening in the public sphere.
There is no place for impartiality and universality, and the notion of a public sphere needs to be revised. We cannot envision a neutral process of public discourse filtering out the best argument if we recognise that the public sphere consists of public and semi-public, reasonable and semi-reasonable positions in struggle with one another, constantly mobilising the whole range of rhetorical figures. The agenda is ‘up for grabs’ and stimulates many sorts of rhetorical and language-games. This is not to say that consensus is impossible, but rather that contingency and power rule, and that consensus may appear as a side effect. What I call the principle of ‘the force of the best arrangement’ means that there is no more force of the best argument as there is no force of the worst. Democratic conflicts are more or less successful constellations of power – and luck.

DIFFERENTIATED LEGITIMACY

The public sphere is not the only site for production of political legitimacy. It may not even be the most central one. Two other central producers of legitimacy, in addition to general elections, are the courts and public administration. Pierre Rosanvallon (2011) illustrates the differentiation of legitimacy in advanced societies that relieves the public sphere from the burden of producing legitimacy. He addresses three forms of legitimacy; the legitimacy of impartiality, of reflexivity and of proximity that complement one another. They all take part in the decentring of democracy, or we could say, in the internal differentiation of the political system. Needless to say, the Internet would be involved in these forms of legitimacy as well.

Legitimacy, argues Rosanvallon, cuts through the distinction between legitimating policies (from above) and legitimacy (from below). Legitimacy refers to a host of relationships between government and society that makes coercion unnecessary: Rosanvallon argues that ‘Democratic legitimacy exists when citizens believe in their own government, which cannot happen unless they have a sense of empowerment. The efficacy of public action depends on legitimacy, and the sense of legitimacy affects the way in which citizens judge the quality of their country’s democracy. In these respects, legitimacy is an “invisible institution” as well as a “sensitive indicator” of the society’s political expectations and the response to those expectations’ (Rosanvallon 2011, 9). What Rosanvallon calls the revolution of democratic legitimacy, has roots in the breakdown of Fordist mass society for the consumer as well as for the voter. It emerges on the background of the need for independent choice under conditions of relative autonomy. Social bonds and identities rest more and more on temporary, cultural, specific
features related to identity, career and education, profession, income, type of workplace, age, neighbourhood, etc.

The legitimacy of impartiality stems from independent oversight and regulatory authorities, efficacy, output legitimacy. It is a democratic ideal: equality, open access, so that impartiality can be supervised and monitored by institutions and the media. Corruption and discrimination could in principle be eliminated. Often such public institutions are given independent positions to secure them from temporary political priorities and negative images of public bureaucracy. Politics of impartiality is necessary to select options and to make choices under conditions of risk uncertainty and conflict. The majority cannot decide everything, nor can it be left to partisan politics; much must be left to procedure and expertise.

The legitimacy of reflexivity is produced by constitutional courts, and parliamentary assemblies are compensatory authorities for the impossibility of equating elections with the general will. This is also the case of public opinion, the constant debates that despite disagreement and confrontation, simulate a neighbourhood of unity as it is confirmed in general elections. The advancement (or could we say simulation) of public reason is important for democratic success where particularities are generalised. I think we could say on the basis of Rosanvallon’s considerations on reflexive legitimacy, that reflexivity in a wide variety of shapes is central in public opinion, not necessarily in reason and consensus. Institutions of reflexivity nevertheless provide oversight.

Finally the legitimacy of proximity derives from the quality of government emphasising participation. Rosanvallon argues that this form of legitimacy is not associated with any particular form of institution, but one could argue that this is generated by the nature of modern media, and public opinion (Rosanvallon 2011, 11). It generally refers to the rising expectation among the citizenry to be seen and recognised, and to a citizenry that must accept the procedure preceding the decision in order to accept it as legitimate. Therefore, public service institutions and political leaders spend vast resources, not on decisions themselves but on the processes behind them. In a hectic media society and demands for transparency, legitimacy processes are less controllable. As the self-esteem of the electorate rises, political leadership with reputational capital is needed (Rosanvallon 2011, 177).

The philosophical debate on recognition (Hegel, Taylor, Honneth, Fraser) reflects how particularity has become essential for both economy and society (Rosanvallon 2011, 179) Power is now ‘recognised as legitimate if it is attentive to individual situations and makes the language of recognition its own’ (Rosanvallon 2011, 179). Thus particularity has given rise to general ‘expectations and demands for fairness, proximity and recognition. Citizens have therefore begun to
think of democracy as a form of government.’ The generality of politics is about to be based on concrete social facts and a determination to master the diversity of needs in society. Politics is now left to address the specificity of social conditions, their practical effects. This gives rise to what Rosanvallon calls *politics of presence*, a political behaviour that applies the language of empathy and closeness. Politics addresses the singular individual as victims or groups with needs. Political leaders place themselves among the ones with demands, in *their* situation.

People can be addressed as individuals, as public opinion, as members of social and cultural groups (religions, regions, identities), or as an abstract principle (the general will) related to talk about rights and democracy. Versions of the people are constituted when they are referred to with opinion polls and elections, with addressing terrorism or when discussing changes in the constitution. These versions belong to different temporalities: the immediately constructed opinion, the more long-term temporalities of the good society and as principle. Unlike long-term media like magazines, journals, books and films, most Internet media favours immediacy, the intuitive and often impulsive public opinion that cannot in itself constitute a base for sound political decisions.

**THE POLITICS OF THE INTERNET**

I have indicated that it makes little sense to place the Internet into a general theory of political deliberation. First of all the theory rests on shaky grounds already in its reference to actual reality. Nor does it present a credible (achievable) ideal. The problem begins right at the understanding of democracy. While the Enlightenment understanding underlines democracy as a way by which the people governs itself, the contemporary concept of democracy must rather mean to express the paradoxical distance between the rulers and the ruled, a distance that historically and functionally only in part has been compensated for by mechanisms like general elections and public opinion. Thus public opinion is not the voice of the people as such, nor is it the voice of the ruler. Rather it ought to be seen as an intermediate phenomenon – as a ‘medium’ that has been conceptualised in order for political theory to fixate on the problem of distance, and a phenomenon that can only be understood through its emergence from early modern times, to its operations in contemporary advanced societies. The construction of the public sphere is also used to explain and legitimise the relationship between democracy and the media.

Trendy Internet-literature, particularly from the US, has stressed the inherent democratic potential of the Internet (Rheingold, Benkler). Its open and decentral-
ised structure, its low threshold for participation and its minimalistic and informal way of organisation has been seen as a model of a preferred society, but also as an engine that would drive society towards growing transparency. As metaphor and technology, the Internet implies revolutionary change of the kind that general left liberal or libertarian political philosophies would endorse. As a template and key, it would press dictatorships towards democracy and democracy towards even more democracy. One could, in other words learn from the Internet how politics and the public sphere ought to operate, and, with the exploding use of the Internet media in all kinds of political participation, we are on the way. Popular writers like Steven Johnson, Jonathan Zittrain, Clay Shirky and Steven Levy all seem to be convinced that the Internet plays a distinct political role in their liberal and democratic understanding of politics.

To be sure, not all scholars adhere to this overly optimistic view that rests on a flawed understanding of both the Internet and society. Mathew Hindman (2009), Evgeny Morozov (2014), Christian Fuchs (2014) and José van Dijck (2013) are important opponents of the moral majority of the Internet. However, the all too common misunderstanding about the Internet is that while openness is seen as a driver towards democracy, “openness” really means vulnerability towards existing powers, and thus an instrument for the most powerful organisations in society. The absence of rules (and the possibility for huge profits) in an open network-structure like the Internet opens the door to the strongest players. In the absence of regulation, the Internet has increasingly been taken over by multinational business. Worldwide companies – like Google, Facebook and Apple are doing what they do, not for the purpose of democracy. Rather they support and make use of democratic values as long as they underpin or at least do not contradict business. In the Silicon Valley world of ideas, democracy tends to be seen as a happy side effect of technological innovation and economic liberalism. The invisible hand of digital capital, they seem to think, also promotes democracy.

At a certain stage, Internet businesses were involved in breaking boundaries and getting access to information, in new ways. Terms like openness, transparency and participation have surely indicated a de facto lower threshold for taking part in political and social movements, but they have also played the role of company slogans. The Internet is many things and in totalitarian as well as democratic countries, it is an instrument for surveillance and control as well as for opposition and protest. It is what the state, civil society and the economy make it to be. Quite correctly, the Internet or any other important infrastructure cannot be seen as politically neutral, but it nevertheless serves the social, political and economic powers that constitute its environment. The Internet should not be seen as an end in itself,
and it has no inherent potential in either democratic or anti-democratic directions. What is negative for the Internet according to Internet libertarians who principally oppose regulation, may nevertheless be good for society. Pervasive surveillance à la NSA should be opposed but not primarily for the sake of the Internet. Information may ‘want’ to be free, but it may also ‘want’ to be controlled.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the story of the Internet is a story of a series of interconnected conflicts among techno-cultures (Rasmussen 2007). Historical narratives about innovation, revolutions, open source and free software, have been mobilised against the powers of strict copyright regimes, the telecoms, Microsoft, and authoritarian governments. In the period 1960–1995 this turbulent history could with a fair degree of reasonability be staged normatively, as the ‘good’ (the Internet geeks) against the bad (public bureaucracies, backward businesses, etc.) With the commercialisation and politisation of the Internet and the (algorithmic) privatisation of the digital public sphere, however, this narrative structure no longer held. The Internet and open source movement won many battles but lost the war. In our century, the Internet is society. The controversies continue but only empirically based analysis can clarify the positions. The Internet is no answer in itself. Openness and transparency are values that business and public administration applies selectively when suitable. As the writer Evgeny Morozow notes, even transparency can be politics with other means, and the leading transparency-guru, Lawrence Lessig, has eventually reached a similar conclusion (Morozov 2013, 81; Lessig, 2009) De facto transparency always exists within a social and political framework and may serve populist impulses that eventually disfavour politics as a necessary way of sorting conflict in society. Questions concerning Internet regulation have turned out to be just as complicated as the regulation of any other business.

In other words, there is no inherent Internet (ir)rationality. What may appear as such derives from the traditions and cultures of Silicon Valley. The openness and the democratic features of the Internet should be understood historically and empirically, not normatively, in that it is highly accessible for users and producers of information and media. That it is a level playing field implies that the more power an organisation has in society, the more power it will have on, and over, the Internet. What we have seen since the turn of the century is that the Internet has been up for grabs. With Wikipedia as an important exception, commercial near-monopolies like Apple, Facebook, Google, Amazon are public companies that must pursue the policies that maximise the value for shareholders. In this regard, they are in no different a position than the ‘old’, despised monopolies like AT&T, IBM, and Microsoft. They would like their actions to be understood in light of lib-
eral political thought, but it would be a grave error to see them as anything else than market strategies following the nature of contemporary capitalism.

An unintended consequence of the semantics of self-governance of an open cyberspace in the 1990s by such organisations as EFF, was that it diverted the most progressive Internet-communities from the dangers of various forms of cybercrime, such as malware, worms, viruses, destructive hacks, and takeovers, trading and free distribution of illicit products, etc. Such illegal activity make use of the open and distributed design and ‘generativity’ of the Internet that was constructed in the 1970s and that worked well among scientists and dedicated users. With the advent of the web and widespread use to all parts of the world this changed. Cyber-crime has become a serious problem for the Internet, a problem that also transforms it. The semantics and the protests against public regulation from the libertarian cyberspace community, it is argued by Jeanette Hoffman (2010), was not helpful to project the real challenges that faced the Internet in the 1990s. Key terms are implementation of firewalls, algorithmic surveillance and an explosion in security software.

USER-GENERATED INNOVATION

Theories of open innovation similarly seem to assume the revolutionary power of the Internet (von Hippel 2005; Chesbrough et al. 2008). Since the Internet cannot be seen as neutral, they seem to assume that it supports a distinct political philosophy. As was the case for the printing press, that political philosophy is based on Enlightenment values. In fact, the tone and perspective resembles those of Youchai Benkler on the field of information and knowledge. Benkler discusses what he calls commons-based peer production in relation to new and highly successful media, mentioning Wikipedia, Slashdot and GNU/Linux as examples of large-scale peer production projects. These sites have overcome the tragedy of the commons problem in that a sufficient number of people choose not to be free riders in the system. Even if profit can be appropriated without investing time in such media, millions of people participate actively. What is the secret? In the literature on the escalation of Web 2.0 media, the following explanatory elements occur:

1. **Size matters**: Large numbers of users make the system more efficient in that more bugs are traced in software (GNU/Linux) or more articles are sent to the collective blog or wiki, which implies a larger number of novel and competent articles (Slashdot, Wikipedia).
2. **Critical mass**: Having reached a certain number of users, a change occurs – the system becomes significantly more useful for current
and potential users. A number of elements play a role here (iterated play, sanctions, conventions (as in games with others), and coordination norms. Mechanisms for indirect appropriation of the benefits of participation: Monetary, hedonic (pleasure of creation ‘hedonic gain’ and social-psychological (a function of the cultural meaning) rewards, reputation, low transaction costs, low threshold). (3) Non-rival goods: Information is reproduced (copied) and distributed at very low marginal cost. (4) Large network-externalities: the value of information grows with the number of users, even if they are passive or ‘free riders’.

Rather than concluding that theses aspects are precisely the dynamics behind monopolisation and commercialisation, Benkler and Eric von Hippel argue for the rationality of sharing, participation and openness. The new liberal, commons-oriented perspective on economic production, they both argue, ensures the growth of social welfare. Not surprisingly, von Hippel’s book is dedicated ‘… to all who are building the information commons.’ (von Hippel 2005)

Von Hippel puts forward a number of assertions that should not be taken for granted, for instance that there is a shift of innovation from producers to users. Studies (many conducted for other purposes) indicate that between 10 to nearly 40 per cent of users engage in modifying their products. There are generally three ways to involve manufactures in user innovation: (1) Manufacturers may produce user-developed innovations for general commercial sale or offer custom manufacturing service to specific users. (2) Manufacturers may sell kits of product-design tools for specific product platforms to ease users’ innovation-related tasks (but also to link innovators to their specific platform). Integrated tool-kits enable users to create and test designs for custom products or services. Cases in point are Harley-Davidson, Microsoft/Excel and iPhone. (3) Manufactures may sell products or services that are complementary to user-developed innovations (Red Hat).

Von Hippel concludes that users are constantly doing product modification and product development in many fields. However, is this really the case if we are talking about user innovation that counts? We all customise things we purchase: We add or remove things on our bikes, cars, coats, bags, training gear, etc. While some of these changes may be of significance, others are not. Is customisation the same as user innovation, or a step towards it? Also most of them are memes: we copy other people’s changes. And they rarely function as feedback to the manufacturer. One of the most important ways to engage in product innovation for users these days is to enter Facebook groups to campaign for, or against changes of products. This is at most about influencing manufacturers as consumers, not as co-innovators. We may call it ‘grass roots lobbying’ and it has nothing to do with product innovation as such.
More importantly, von Hippel advocates outsourcing, the compensation being the opportunity to communicate with others. *Outsourcing* is generally viewed as involving the contracting out of a business operation that previously took place in-house. The external provider would typically be another business, often overseas where labour power is less expensive. The rationale behind outsourcing is of course that it lowers the overall cost of production because it reduces a number of in-house indirect processes like structuring, negotiating, pricing, introducing technologies and its maintenance, etc. Economic theory recommends that a business concentrate on core business and outsource other operations like IT, support, marketing or production of modular parts of the main product. In this way, the fixed costs of the business are reduced and transformed into variable costs and makes these variable costs more predictable. This may also increase the quality of the product, since external specialists with access to talent and expertise compete to take responsibility over a part of the production. In this way these partners, because they keep themselves updated on their activity, become important providers of innovation and new ideas. And outsourced production, when logistically successful, reduces time to market and leaves more of the problems followed by ups and downs in the market to the contractors. It could be argued that von Hippel is precisely delivering new arguments for outsourcing to contractors, in his case to groups that do not expect to get paid. The prospects for businesses would be even greater.

Since there is no compensation – could we talk of exploitation? To discuss this we may look to the new world of Web 2.0 and social media. Baym and Burnett (2008) for instance note that music fans spend time and effort to promote and support their music in various independent ways. This is unpaid ‘immaterial labour’ with as much value as professionally produced content. This has been seen as exploitation in that the Net is used to outsource labour to users, labour that actually contributes to the profit making of corporations. That this kind of activity is not experienced as repetitive but rather as enjoyable, does not change this structural fact. However, the activity used on for-profit sites (or state agencies like NASA) cannot be distinguished from not-for-profit sites like Wikipedia since in both cases, it is a matter of voluntary work. The users are not forced to sell or give away their labour-power. Also, we should remember from Marx’s analysis that the proletariat consisted of ‘free’ labourers; they are free to sell their labour power for a wage to survive. That they did not get paid for the surplus value of the products does not change this fact. Therefore, only a shallow reading of Marx supports the argument that this is a case of capitalist exploitation. Also, if one insists in using the term, it rather resembles a *premodern* kind of exploitation. Contemporary
user-generated activity, however, depends on complete individual independence and freedom of the user, allowing for him and her to enter into rewarding activities, often favourable for social status and future careers.

To keep within the Marxist framework: In mass media and on the Web, the use-value of attention is transformed into exchange-value. In Web 2.0, use-value of social interaction is transformed into exchange value of segmented attention. In this sense, both kinds of media are machines that extract exchange value out of use value, mainly through the aid of targeted advertising. In Web 2.0, both the level of activity and the techniques of tracing have reached a more advanced level (logfiles, cookies, tags...). Through internal systems of advanced, fast and visual statistics on all aspects of use, social interaction is transformed to audience activity and sold to advertisers. In this commoditising, social interaction does not disappear. Activity in social media thus operates in a dual manner, as meaningful interaction in private and public spheres, and as a commoditised product. Some have called this peculiar user-role ‘pro-sumers’. (Bruns 2008)

The analysis needs to account for the dual situation of meaningful sociality among users that at the same time is productive labour producing surplus value. This peculiar situation emerged with advertising as a main income source for the press and commercial broadcasting. Then, the work involved consisted in directing our time and attention to media output in a regular habitual manner. Although one usually says that the audience produces meaning in a hermeneutical sense, they produce it for themselves and their lifeworld. No such meaning reaches the producers as goods of exchange value. With Internet-based fora and media this changes in that users actually add information of some marketable value.

Commercial mass media involves the transformation of people into audiences, and, and for the majority of them, the subsequent selling of audience attention to advertisers. The construction and selling of attention constitute the crux of people’s paradoxical involvement in media economics. Cubitt calls this the ‘proletarianization of consumption’, a phenomenon based upon audiencing: ‘Audiencing – the work that audiences do when they use media – takes place in a large-scale and complex industry involving content providers, service providers, account managers, media buyers, the marketing of media to agencies and of agencies to clients, all premised on the founding instance that audiences can be delivered to end-users.’ (Cubitt 2005, 81)

Attention is further differentiated according to demographics and values in order to maximise its value. In commercial broadcasting and advertisement-funded print media, the role of the consumer is specialised and grouped into a segmented concept of audience in the environment of the media system. Audiences
receive entertainment, news and information in exchange for attention, which can be sold or ‘hired’. As long as the media organisation keeps costs of producing/purchasing media content lower than the value of its audience value, the business is viable.

Put differently: The value of what viewers receive in exchange for their attention, must be lower than the value of the attention they supply; attention value must be higher than the media output value. The time and attention that users spend on advertisements and in producing content is the surplus labour of production, creating surplus value. In this sense, the audience is systematically ‘underpaid’ for this production, or else there would be no profit (Fuchs 2008, 191). As mentioned however, since the audiences are not free to sell their attention in the same sense that workers are ‘free’ to sell their labour power, we cannot speak of exploitation in a Marxist sense.

To what extent alienation (Marx) and deskilling (Braverman) are at play here are not simply empirical questions. To what extent the reward is of sufficient affective and social value for the user, can only be determined by the users themselves, and it seems that structural analysis from this normative perspective is a dead end. This of course, does not imply that structural analysis of Web 2.0 communities must be exchanged for phenomenological analysis. Fandom and other kinds of intensive user activity could be seen as either free labour or as participation because it is both. Tim O’Reilly (2005) illustrates this well by arguing that users are participating without thinking that they participate. That’s where the power comes. In other words, the social fact of social media is an unintended product of millions of individual entries, but also technical infrastructure, constitution and application of rules and statutes (for example to expel users) is highly centralised and motivated by profit.

User-generated content in Web 2.0 constitutes information commodities produced by users through their comments, videos, music, texts, chats, etc. From a Marxist point of view, exploitation is more dramatic than in the case of advertising-based mass media, which relies on meaning-production that rarely reaches the producing institution as anything else than abstract ratings. Web 2.0 therefore, may be looked at as democritisation of media, but also as a further commodification of human interaction. Although Marx’s theory of value is sophisticated in explaining the connection between labour and profit rate, this new situation cannot be explained only in this way because Web 2.0 exists only partly within the realm of the labour market – it also mediates communication in the private and civil spheres. A differentiation of democratisation and commodification takes place, involving processes of trust, creativity and learning. This is also the case
with the mass media. User-generated participation may generate social change and increase circulation and profit rate. Von Hippel’s prime examples are only profit-seeking companies, and his view thus ignores important aspects of the processes of production that he is studying.

User-generated products of social media (stories, photos, games, maps, even software) are products of social participation and strategic maximising of profit. As Christian Fuchs (2012) notes, the aim of social media platforms is not to empower users but to commodify their personal data in increasingly sophisticated ways, and the same is argued by Jennis et al. (2014). I think the increasing social participation and social interaction should be seen as a recognised side effect of commodification. The very common view that social media enhances individual and collective action because of its participatory potential, is unbalanced. The opposite view, that social media are only sites of exploitation obfuscates the important difference between the industrial worker who is forced to sell his labour power and the user of social media. In other words, products and social activity in social media are situated in a terrain vague that is far from understood.
Chapter 8
Towards Internet Realism

‘Where is the new Michel Foucault who tries to explain how modern power is exercised?’

Julian Assange 1

To draw on the Internet as a normative model for society, and furthermore to adapt society to the Internet, would imply precisely the contrary of what the Internet utopians and liberals want: a society under the control of market forces that produce and profit from extraordinarily smart ways of invading our privacy. To understand this implies realism. Social research including media research needs to examine how various economic and political powers rhetorically and factually make use of the Internet and seek to direct its development. Evgeny Morozov positions Internet realism in opposition to Internet centrism: ‘Thus while Internet-centrists assume that Google is “open” by default, their opponents – let’s call them Internet realists – assume that Google does a lot of work to look “open” and investigate what that work involves. While Internet-centrists tend to be populist and unempirical, Internet realists start with no assumptions about the intrinsic values of “openness” and “transparency” – let alone their inherent presence in digital networks – and pay particular attention to how these notions are involved and manifested in particular debates and technologies. While Internet-centrists believe that “openness” is good in itself, Internet realists investigate what the rhetoric of “openness” does for governments and companies – and what they do for it’ (Morozov 2013, 93). The Internet, as a complex ensemble of genres, media and technologies, contexts and users, clearly serves no political model more than any other infrastructure. Rather, like any fair competition ground it tends to serve the strongest players.

In order to understand the political (and democratic) role of the Internet, it is necessary to begin with an empirically sensitive and normatively neutral model of public opinion. Such a model cannot be presented in full here, and I must confine

myself to sketching out some of the ways such a realistic theory of public opinion might go. I draw on some of the insights of political realism and the political sociology of Niklas Luhmann (1990, 2002). While political realism poses a powerful critique against idealism, systems theory is among the few positions that present an alternative to action-theoretical thinking of conventional ideas about public opinion.

In order to understand the role of the Internet, it is necessary to abstract from the perspective of agency to its historical and functional operation in a modern (differentiated) and therefore complex society. In such a society, public opinion appears as a reflection and mirror for communication among sectors, organisations and individuals of society. In questions of what to do about society and who is to do it, i.e., in the question of political power, politics is the main address for public communication. Public opinion provides facts and opinion, problems and solutions, as a reservoir for politics. Contrary to what the theories of a deliberative democracy argue, reason and quality have no special place here. The motive of influence in the name of reason is one among many, and motive must not be confused with effect. Public opinion presents condensed political communication of all sorts. The filtering mechanisms in the institutions and media of public opinion operate according to the logics of the media, the technologies, the private sphere, the economy and so on.

I have already hinted that the background for the current self-understanding of the public sphere is historical. In the nineteenth century, parliaments observed its environments as argument (see Guibentif 2010). Movements and sentiments were increasingly mediated by the emerging press, and could be attributed to support for distinct positions. Policies could be presented with arguments that it would reduce discontent and riots. (Bismarck) The general recognition of this mechanism enhances mobilisation in an emerging modern public opinion. The new complex interaction game of legitimacy and legitimation emerged between the state and civility in ever more sophisticated and differentiated ways. Initially, the emerging mediated public opinion (press) found itself in an intermediate position, (structural coupling), but subsequently developed values of its own. The backbone of public opinion, the mass media, differentiated out a form of communication that complicated the production of legitimacy for the state and political forces in public opinion in the twentieth century. Legitimacy needed to be produced materially through a welfare state of universal services that subsequently could be critically evaluated and compared. Today, public opinion is a mechanism or filter, which has placed itself at the ‘centre’ of society. With the increasing differentiation and complexity of society, leaving politics in no prioritised position, public opinion gets a
tougher job in condensing, fixing, compressing, and selecting issues for political consideration. In the 1990s, with the advent of the Web, the Internet presented itself as a problem and a solution: It opened for a democratisation of public opinion, which subsequently expanded its periphery considerably into the new century. It simultaneously presented a series of new ways to handle this dramatic information flow.

Public opinion has passed a transition towards expansion, complexity, increasing sensitivity to local and informal questions and problems that used to go under the radar, as well as large-scale leaks of information, etc. In terms of political power, the Internet introduced increasing participation (often confused with democratisation in a normative sense) and increasing control in the name of stability and profit. It has admitted large portions of the formerly relatively passive public into the public opinion, and paved the way for pervasive surveillance and algorithmic monitoring.

The main question of ‘rationality’ in the wake of the Internet is political: How can politics handle the complexity of society when even the issue-organising function of the political public opinion becomes so loaded with diversity? Would public opinion still be able to generalise problems and make them into topics for debate? What happens with political legitimacy understood as a general acceptance of the political order and political decisions – if contingency becomes more apparent, if political ‘reason’ as such is doubted? As we constantly observe in Europe and elsewhere, the alternative to legitimacy and trust is not only coherent protest, but also apathy and wild riots. To find excuses for action, power does not have to look far.

In a generalised view, public opinion is reflection about society. However, reflection produces no solutions or ways out of fundamental problems, only what Charles Cooley called a looking-glass self for politics and other social systems. To see oneself similarly to the way others see one, through the mirror of public opinion, may induce a change of behaviour. But politics is no longer in the position to command fundamental change, and Internet-influenced public opinion is increasingly difficult to decode. Precisely for this reason, it may be easier to select preferential, that is favourable, information as legitimation. The mirror-effect of the Internet is steamed by the multi-dimensionality of media, genres, styles and participants.

Sociology as well as Internet research and media research need to approach this situation soberly and analytically by trying to make sense of the circulation of issues as structure, constantly emerging and dissolving. Often solid empirical work stands in a peculiar contrast to the omnipresent normative theory of the pub-
lic sphere that presents reason and consensus as ‘reconstructive’ ideals. The usual strategy is to point out the discrepancy between the model of a rational public sphere and the imperfect reality. To compare a reality characterised by power struggle and conflict with the utterly unachievable, is however no viable strategy for empirical social sciences. Society can never reach such ideals, nor is it approaching such ideals. Theory should rather address real phenomena, like the careers of public topics in the age of the Internet, in a generalised non-normative sense. The question ought to be: What roles do the operations of Internet-based media play in reproducing social and political stability?

Due to its low threshold for use (and the breakdown in many Internet-based media of the distinction between sender and receiver), the Internet enables new topics and opinions, and new forms and styles of expression. Its closeness to the private sphere encourages communication about personal experiences, feelings and opinions that are less disciplined and conforming. Previously private political communication now become public, and those who express themselves always seem to find a listener. And if there is a listener somewhere, there is always a topic to be constructed or addressed. Also the unpolitical (aesthetic, scientific, emotional) ways of handling political topics increase, as does the non-political contextualisation. Different rules for constructing topics in order to attract attention apply. Many of the same rules for generating attention and popularity in the mass media (actuality, closeness, moral indignation, person-orientation, scandal, etc.) prevail. The majority of topics may have short life spans unless they are picked up by professional media. They may converge and diverge, transmute in various ways, probably in a hastier way than was the case in the age of the press and broadcasting. Time passes more quickly on the Internet. We may ask: in the age of digital evanescence, what seems to last?

The power of public opinion to integrate on a national level evaporates, as its moral authority differentiates. Too many things go on at the same time, enhancing segmentation and ‘balkanisation.’ The nature of ‘parallel lives’, a multitude of scenes and events for specialised publics, of ignorance and knowledge side by side, increases with the growing number of topics in a wide variety of media and genres. The status of the sender decreases. The integration effect takes place more in the nature of interconnected clusters than as local and national audiences. When the national mass media seriously lose their audiences and become reduced to niche media, the predominance of network integration introduces intensified challenges for political society involving legitimacy.

Although the Internet is truly one of the most astonishing wonders of this world, its political uses can no longer be described as progress. It implies an intensified
renewing of society and for every good effect, there seem to be a negative one. All effects have side effects, and so it goes. The nature of change, increasing complexity that is in part controlled by the very complexity-inducing mechanisms, is in a sense beyond good and bad. Its immense variability implies a more demanding environment for politics and other social systems, to encode and decode in strategic successful ways. The question remains whether public opinion is able to present a politically meaningful environment for politics.

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

While digital media bring increasing participation (and inequalities), fresh viewpoints and new solutions, it is harder to see how they enable consolidation and overview. I do not argue that personal media are antithetical to the idea of a public sphere, but that they contribute much more to diversity than to convergence. The legitimacy and effectiveness of the public sphere and democracy as a whole are dependent not only on diversity, but also on coherence. How is the modern public sphere able to tackle its own indeterminacy, fragmentation and complexity? In Habermas’s model, procedural debates ensure that consensus does not have to rely on common ethical values to be actualised. The model assumes pluralism, not ethical conformity. This, however, requires that the discursive threads in various media and fora actually become connected. This is not necessarily the case with the Internet. Both sociology and media studies have focused on individualisation and the dependence of the individual on expert systems. The consequences for the public sphere have been underestimated.

The mass media frame the public sphere vis-à-vis the national political systems. This will be the state of things for many years to come. The reason for this is not simply technological conservatism, but is related to the structural features of the
media as suitable carriers for a public sphere with democratic and political ambitions. The mass media are characterised by a rupture between the senders and their many receivers, thus with limited possibilities for feedback. This essential feature allows for public opinion to disseminate and circulate among elites and intellectuals, to be dealt with by languages of expertise, to transform into relatively consensus bodies of ideas, and to be easily scanned by the political system. Voices of opinion have the possibility to observe, to understand and to learn from one another.

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

We see two approaches to political legitimacy and liberalism: The public use of politics, vs. the political use of publics. The latter refers to the realist emphasis on self-legitimation and the public sphere as an arena and a scene for rhetorical performance. I do not claim that the two must be mutually exclusive in their practices. In that respect, they need not be so very different as seen as practical politics. But they are certainly connected to rival theoretical perspectives. The first has Kantian roots, while the second has Machiavellian roots. The latter perspective, the courting, winning and maintaining of political power in modern democracies depends on public opinion. Modern politics is to a large extent a drama played out in front of audiences of spectators and debates. This kind of politics must draw on morality (obligation, responsibility, rights) and gives an impression of what the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott called ‘politics of faith’. With a closer look, what is played out is a political use of moral publics.

In a realist view, the public sphere is as much a product of politics and law as of reason and morality of the popular sovereignty. Social movements and NGOs in
civil society that are not aware of this fact will not be heard or attract interest and they would not attain sufficient efficiency. They know that political authorities use their prime resources: regulations and decisions, not as something subordinated to reason and morality. It is my opinion that a sober, cool-headed and descriptive analysis of political communication can operate critically, much in the same way as the wise general assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy army or the opposing football team. Morality plays its role, but it cannot play out at the centre of a theory of politics, without blinding itself to a series of real-political elements of politics. In a non-normative sense the public space is concerned with the maintenance and regulation of authority. The public sphere, space or opinion is only one of several sites of legitimacy and legitimation in order to secure the stability of the political regime or system, mainly for the purpose of preserving stability. These are perhaps uncomfortable thoughts. John Gray argues that realism as a political theory may be too uncomfortable for a culture that prizes psychological comfort above anything else: ‘…it is a reasonable question whether western liberal societies are capable of the moral effort that is involved in setting aside hopes of world-transformation.’ (Gray 2007, 272–73)

In the public space, politics is made public, and so is the response of the individuals who are organised into the constellation we call a public sphere. By the very positioning from the private to the public, a totality is constructed that demonstrates the non-violent power, but nevertheless power, of politics. By ordering and lining up individuals into a public structural constellation, much of the legitimation work is in fact done, energising the efficiency of politics. A sociological theory should thus be rigged that can both account for this realistic situation, and sharpen its focus on the actual functionality of politics and the public opinion in a way that enables sociology and political theory to criticise their functioning in basic way. Rather than a critical-normative and reconstructive strategy, we may explore the many proposals for a non-normative understanding of public debate, from Machiavelli via Weber and Lippman to Luhmann. The central idea of contingency makes very clear for a realist that there is only an accidental ideal-rational basis for political visions, or utopian thinking.

What constitutes a basic difference between moral liberalism and realistic liberalism is that moralists, following the dogmas of Enlightenment, consider politics to be an unfinished activity (‘project’) about completing or improving democracy. However, politics is the circulation of political communication that takes place now, even if its topics always refer to the future. A constant challenge for political power is to refer to prospected hopes (political promises and visions) in order to gain support in the present. The fact that these promises or visions can
never be met must be compensated with political techniques for generating at least minimalist legitimacy through symbolist or symbolic politics and leadership (Bourdieu, Weber) rhetoric, stylisation, TV-charisma, etc. Such fabrication of trust is therefore endemic to the public sphere. We cannot make our judgements on politics, as Pierre Bourdieu noted, without the symbolic in mind. The same goes for structural features of institutions, the creative use of time (delaying and speeding up) in decision processes. All talk about the (improved) future is meant for the present. While liberal political theory provides politics with ideology in the form of utopias, realist theory provides liberals with hypothetical disillusionment. The irony is that the deliberative and realist approaches have swapped normative political functions: While the deliberative approach, once a post-Marxist, critical approach, stood against dominating liberal versions of aggregative and managerial versions, the approach of political realism and political systems theory is today the approach to democracy with a critical potential. The deliberative approach has achieved success and is largely co-opted politically and constitutionally – as the necessary ingredient in a true democracy today, at national and international levels. Public deliberation (including the conditions for the press and debates on the Internet, etc.) of political issues is the standard by which we measure our democratic maturity. In certain constitutions, the public debate is formally subsumed under the responsibility of the state. The semantics of the deliberative approach has become the language of national governments and the EU Commission. Deliberative political theory now supplies legitimating ideas for a federal EU guarding free markets. Against this, political realism offers to continue the Weberian tradition of unmasking political power, including strategies for self-legitimation and control. While the deliberative approach has been included in the self-description of politics and now serves as helpful fiction, a realist approach describes politics and democracy precisely as fictions and realities. The time to posit universal reason has passed. Today, the world is spinning around by way of ironic contradictions and paradoxes that the political theorist needs to bring up to the light. I think that a more realistic notion would be to settle for exposure of unhappy paradoxes and possibly to avoid the worst catastrophes. Marx is at his best when analysing the birth of industrial capitalism, hardly in his brief sketches and vision of communism. Freedom, justice and equality are obvious demands made by people all over the world who are experiencing the opposite. They are however abstract dreams – even ideology – when referred to in social and political theory. To argue analytically that a better future would somehow come out of the current irrational, exploitative, and ecologically disastrous capitalism implies improbable idealism. When realism fails to identify a historical
subject or any progressive alternative, it is because there aren’t any. This is not pessimism or scepticism, terms too often invested with morality. What Bernard Williams calls ‘The first question of the state’ can be no other but to protect the citizen from external threats. The most important good is the absence of evil. Realism of a Marxist or Weberian kind need not moralise further, only pinpoint the catastrophic mistakes that have been and are being done. One is left to ‘articulate suffering, explain the root causes of the systematic destruction of humanity and the rest of nature, and unmask irrationalities embedded in social structures and day-to-day life.’ (Gunderson 2015, 33–34) Modern realists as different as Niklas Luhmann, Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss all turn the non-idealising approach toward idealising in a critical manner, and address the latter as a pleasant self-image or as ideology in a Marxist sense.

Idealism views politics normatively as an ethical practice and involves a model of human (political) behaviour as moral behaviour in order for society to be organised in a good and just way. Exactly what kind of morality and good society would vary among writers within the camp of political idealism. However, this realism does not necessarily lead to conservatism or reactionary ideas, not even resignation, since its task must be to demonstrate and explain irrationality. In opposition to ideal theory, the task is to not redistribute ideology about a better world ahead, but account for the hijacked possibilities. Realism, as I have indicated, begins with the political. The closest we get to a norm for a realist understanding of democratic politics is probably stability, as absence of arbitrary power. Justice and the good society exist as internal to politics, as ammunition for the contesters and as the self-understanding of politics in general. The system of political pluralism organised as political parties and geographical constituencies is conceived of the democratic realisation that there exist different and contradictory notions of what is just in society. As soon as we bring in the connections to the people through regular elections and the public sphere, we are back to the ‘ethics first’ view of liberal and deliberalist approaches. (Geuss 2008) There is no genuinely political conception of justice. (Rossi 2012, 157)

What we have come to call the public sphere is the mechanism by which the political system speaks of social order under conditions of reflexivity and complexity. It is the way the political system operates rationally, by adjusting the environment to politics and by adjusting itself to the environment. The main discursively-based agreement between state and society is this public rhetoric under the conditions of history and contingency.

On top of the agenda of an Internet realism on politics is I think another burning issue, and here I rephrase insights from Jane Mansbridge (2014): There is an
increasing need for legitimacy in order to make the necessary sacrifices to solve a series of problems (climate change being probably the biggest; crises of finance, debt, social inequality, terrorism and migration being others). At the same time, legitimacy for coercive state action, for reasons of individualism, failed policies, corruption, media cynicism, etc. tends to decrease. How will political power apply digital media to handle this dilemma?
References


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