Regarding the Status of Others

About the disappearance of the public sphere and the reinvention of political debate

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Introduction

Inspired by both the current political struggles in North Africa and the Middle East, but also the supposed lack of public participation in Western societies, I would like to question the democratic potential of the Internet as a space for genuine political discussions and new impetus to political participation. Whereas the West is experiencing an increased voter apathy accompanied by a general detachment of citizens from conventional politics, the governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have recently undergone massive protest movements, partly leading to a change of authority but also resulting in international armed interventions demanding a more democratic governance. Social network sites such as Facebook and microblogging tools such as Twitter are assumed to have played a major role in this process. However, it is arguable if the recent glorification of the medium is the right validation of these practices. Again this stirs up the ongoing discourse about the democratic nature of the Internet — a debate with a wide range of positions from utopian to pessimist approaches. Its advocates emphasize that the Web enables new forms of participation, therefore empowers individuals, revitalizes the Habermasian public sphere and enforces a more democratic society. The critics on the other hand suspect a "Machiavellian tool that inevitably leads to increased State surveillance and monitoring of its citizens" (Breindl 2010, p.43). Both ends of the spectrum will be questioned further, thus revising the socio-political promise of the participatory Web and investigating the impact of new communication / information technologies on our society.

The Democratic Potential of the Participatory Web

The Internet is flooded with a plethora of online social media, consisting of blogs and micro-blogging tools (e.g. Twitter), photo and file sharing systems (e.g. YouTube, Flickr, SlideShare), collaborative platforms (e.g. Wikipedia), social network sites (e.g. Facebook, mySpace) and virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life). Whereas some are largely designed for personal presentation, others enable collaborative production of knowledge, harbor critical discussions, or can be even used as a tool for political action and hence shift power from governmental institutions to groups of individual citizens. This empowering potential of the so-called participatory Web — as recently demonstrated in the fall of dictatorships in the Middle

East and various African countries — was anticipated by the French (and coincidentally Tunis-born) philosopher Pierre Lévy, who already in the late 1990s suggested that the Internet could have a transformative effect on global society. He points out, that the "destiny of democracy and cyberspace are intimately linked because they both involve what is the most essential to humanity: the aspiration to freedom and the creative power of collective intelligence" (in Breindl 2010, p. 43). Lévy claims that through participation of individuals or groups, the Web will ensure the evolutionary unfolding of civilization towards a more democratic society. Furthermore he argues, that it provides a universal access among participants "to make human groups as conscious as possible of what they are doing together and provide them with a practical means of coordination". This very potential of online tools for gathering and organising people, can be identified in various recent examples of political movements. But according to Lévy even more important, is the process of "collective intelligence", that is indispensable in a post-industrial, post-modern world provoking a direct democratic system, that actively involves all citizens who hence displace political representatives by "collective thinking" (Lévy 1997, p.93). This paradigm of prevailing political structures, forces and ideologies is, however, at the most optimistic climax of the controversy around the democratic potential of the Internet.

The Internet as Public Sphere(s)

Terry Cochran values Lévy's approach as "a radical renewal of social and political thought" and states, that his philosophy "provokes a metamorphosis in the very notion of culture" (Cochran 1999, p.67). Yet Lévy's assumptions are strongly associated with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, that he repeatedly acknowledges as his main source of inspiration. And indeed, where, if not online, can the revolutionary notion of equality, freedom, and brotherhood be found in a contemporary form? Already in the early stages of the Internet, Lévy has identified these principles of equlity and liberty "embodied in the technological appartuses" (in Cochran 1999, p.68) and suggests:

> In the era of electronic media, equality is realized in the possibility for individuals to put in circulation for everyone; freedom exists in encrypting software and in transborder access to multiple virtual communities; lastly, brotherhood appears in global interconnectivity. (in Cochran 1999, p.68)

This description of a space for communities most likely reminds us of Jürgen Habermas' notion of the "public sphere". His book "Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" was published in 1962 and predicted a crises of modern democratic politics and demands a public space for genuine political disussion. Again reflecting on the Age of Enlightenment, Habermas is aiming to reconstruct the public sphere as a "network for communicating information and points of view" (Habermas 1996, p.360). This outline of a forum for debate separate from the political apparatus, is for Habermas a space reserved for conversation oriented towards a programatic discussion rather than revolutionary action. However, it is this physical public space that is — at least in the West — allegedly disappearing. Locations such as the agora, churches, cafés and public squares have vanished as vibrant places for political communication from everyday live. The French anthropologist Marc Augé appends shopping malls, highways, airports and hotels to his number of so-called "Non-places" that mirror this communicational negligence and lack of space for human interaction even more radical. Whereas Paul Virilio in 1994 identifies screens and electronic displays as a preview of the "Vision Machine" to compensate this lack of public venues (Virilio 1994, p.64), it is the social Web that currently pledges a resort for human interaction and acclaims the reinvention of the public sphere.

Mass-Mediated vs. Networked Public Sphere

Among others, the idea of an online public sphere, was put forward by Yochai Benkler. In his book "The Wealth of Networks" from 2006 he claims, that the "Internet as a technology, and the networked information economy as an organizational and social model of information and cultural production, promise the emergence of a substantial alternative platform for the public sphere" (2006, p.177). According to Benkler, the new network information economy is characterized by non market modes of participation and production, that allow the formation of an online public sphere, which, as described by Ben Roberts, "better serves the exercise of political freedom necessary in a liberal democracy" (2009). This shift from supposed pure consumers to active users and producers promises an infinite distribution of power to individuals and seems convincingly liberating, yet unreal in its utopian form. However, the elimination of communication costs, an allegedly easy access and a seemingly lowered threshold for sharing and participating to, what Lévy has described as “collective thinking”, facilitate the performance of individuals in terms of media production and distribution. The emergence of blogs, forums and micro-blogging tools has filled the web with alternative commentatorship and thereby questions what main-stream media can offer. No longer there is a clear distinction between producers and consumers, between authors and audience. The Sudanese journalist Hassan Ibrahim even refers to this new hybrid form of citizen journalism itself as a revolution:

> [F]or the first time an average human walking down the streets of Jakarta, New York, or Khartoum, or Darfur, can actually pick up the phone and dial a number and report what they see — you’re recruiting journalists from all over the world, people who know nothing about the secrets of the trade, of the industry, but they just saw something and they want to report it. And that’s a revolution, when you have millions and millions of reporters around the world. (in Boler 2008, p.16)

But even though these possibilities might be true for some, the idealized version of an informed and active citizen does not necessarily correspond to reality. Regardless, new collaborative practices may lead to revised forms of representations and collaborative constructions of truth. As Foucault argues, there is always a “mutual relation between systems of truth and modalities of power” (in Renzi 2008, p.73). And it is this shift of power to new actors and responsive audiences that is the biggest promise of the new digital technologies.

State Surveillance between Public and Private

Since traditional boundaries between professionals and amateurs are getting blurred, new protagonists are taking over the role of reporters, who are no longer only comissioned by mass-media. Especially in times of political crisis, these new protagonists can simultaneously be victims, witnesses, political activists and correspondents, who may bypass conservative informational structures and provide what we would like to call an authentic view. But by communicating to the outside world, these active citizens put themselves on public display and thereby in the line of fire. Under the pretense of state security and most likely the utilization of the inflated construction of fighting terrorism, every action can be monitored, recorded, or worse, prohibited and convicted. As the Indonesian writer Imam Samroni stresses, “what is secure for the nation-state is taken to mean true security for everyone, a highly dubious proposition" (in Poster 1995). Solely believing in the power of the basic architecture of the Internet as a network of networks without central control is therefore no longer true. Both the State authority and commercial considerations are subversively recollecting what might have originally been a Wild Wild Web. And even though we trust online products as empowering tools for spreading the opinions of its citizens, we are laying our trust in companies that might at some point turn their backs on its clients and provide the State with any requested data about their users, that can easily be taken out of context. Dystopian scenarios can therefore remind us of Foucault's depiction of the "panopticon" from 1975 — an architectural and social construction, in which prisoners are constantly watched (or believe they are being watched) and act accordingly. And it is easy to fall for apocalyptic prophesies of fiction books from Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" to George Orwell's "1984". For now, however, it seems that people proceed to ignore and neglect that they are being surveilled. The walls between the private and the public are continuously getting demolished and by exposing any aspect of our lives, new online "happytopias" are being created.

Regarding the Status of Others

But this notion of sharing is not only filling the web with every possible detail of our private lives and infiltrating our virtual walls as a simulacrum for public toilets. It is also alowing certain issues and concerns to grow and get attention. There is no way to avoid this burst of information and resist to acknowledge what others have to say. *Regarding the status of others* therefore might be the main change in how we perceive the world around us. Not a single mass-mediated perspective, but dozens of sources are shaping our opinion. Our engine is a desire and longing for a truth, whose authorship has been reserved for the professional elites for too long. As Megan Bolder stresses in "Digital Media and Democracy", it is a double-edged contradiction of an awareness that "all truths are constructed, alongside an effective desire for truth and an urgent political need for accuracy and responsible reporting" (2008, p.8). It is an aspiration for authenticity that gladly ignores the subjectivitiy of the image-makers.

What Susan Sontag in her book “Regarding the Pain of Others” on war photography describes as the “ultra-familiar, ultra celebrated image — of an agony, of ruin — [which] is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war” (2003, p.24) has been altered into an even more immediate narrative, written by “amateurs” of real life. Sontag claims, that such amateur pictures are “thought to be less manipulative” and therefor posses a “special kind of authenticity” (2003, p.27). Social media play by these rules of using testimonials. The latest suffering is served via tweets and status updates hot and in a digestible scale, just right to be dissolved between the morning coffee and afternoon tea. This mediated knowledge of war invokes a hypothetical shared experience that in Susan Sontag’s words “proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence” (2003, p.102). She further notes that “[f]or a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war” (2003, p.14). And yet witnessing murder and agony from second row seem to easily fade away from our views. The compassion, Sonntag argues,

> needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing ‘we’ can do — but who is that ‘we’? — and nothing ‘they’ can do either — and who are ‘they’? — then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic. (Sontag, p.101)

Conclusion

Yet contemporary history seems to prove us differently. Active individuals — at least in some parts of the world — are reclaiming both the streets and the Web, thereby triggering an electronically mediated discourse, that recaptures space for political discussions not only online. It echos both in main-stream media coverage and seems to build up an unavoidable pressure on international politics. What we experience today is therefor not a homogeneous space of a top-down power structure, but an intertwined hierarchy of platforms, providing us a accumulation of truths by different players. Fluid forms of engagement allow individuals to shape their views and appropriate the new digital tools for their own purposes — however meaningful these might be for the common well-being. In order to unfold the real democratic potential of the Internet, however, a distinct media literacy and critical as well as deliberate engagement with the medium are inevitable. Only under these circumstances collective thinking really can lead to more direct democratic practices and leave a noticeable impression on the political status of our societies.

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