

# 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 as well as the Middle East and 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 debate about the democratic nature of the Internet, divided into a utopian and a pessimistic approach. Its advocates emphasize that the Web enables new forms of participation, therefore empowers individuals, revitalizes the Habermasian public sphere and is thus resulting in 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 aspects 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 harbor critical discussions, enhance collaborative production of knowledge, or can even be used as a tool for organizing 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. Lévy claims that through participation of individuals or groups, the Web will ensure the evolutionary unfolding of civilization towards a more democratic 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). “Cyberculture”, he argues, 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 process of collective intelligence is indispensable in a post-industrial, post-modern world provoking a direct democratic system, that according to Lévy, actively involves all citizens who hence displace political representatives by “collective thinking”. (Lévy 1997, p.93) Even though he repeatedly acknowledges the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as his inspiration, Terry Cochran values his approach as “a radical renewal of social and political thought” and states, that Lévy “provokes a metamorphosis in the very notion of culture” (Cochran 1999, p.67). 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)

But where, if not online, can the revolutionary notion of equality, freedom, and brotherhood be found in its purest form? Already in earlier stages of the Internet, Lévy identifies “these ‘values’ [...] embodied in the technological apparatuses. 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). It is this description of space for communities that 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.

Again reflecting on the Enlightenment, Habermas is aiming to reconstruct the public sphere as a “network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas 1996, p.360), the formation of a forum for debate separate from the political apparatus, which is a space reserved for conversation oriented towards a programmatic discussion rather than revolutionary action. However, it is this physical public space that — at least in the West — seems to be disappearing. Locations such as the agora, churches, cafés and public squares have vanished as vibrant places for political communication from everyday life. The French philosopher Marc Augé appends shopping malls, highways, airports and hotels to his number of so-called “Non-places” that mirror this communicational negligence even more radical. Whereas Paul Virilio in 1994 identifies screens and electronic displays as a preview of “vision machines” to compensate the lack of public venues (Virilio 1994, p.64), it is the social Web that currently pledges a resort for human interaction and the reinvention of the public sphere.

#### **Mass-Mediated vs. Networked Public Sphere**

Yochai Benkler 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). An allegedly easy access, the liberation of speech and borderless communication ascribed to the digital sphere promise an infinite distribution of power to its users. 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 seems convincingly liberating, and is yet unreal in its utopian form. However, no longer there is a clear distinction between producers and consumers, between authors and audience. The elimination of communication costs 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 that also challenge main-stream media. The Sudanese journalist Hassan Ibrahim even refers to this

new hybrid form of citizen journalism 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 kinds of representations and 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 technologies.

#### **State Surveillance between Public and Private**

The protagonists now play the role of reporters, who are no longer commissioned by mass-media. In times of war they can be victims, witnesses or political activists, that by communicating to the outside world put themselves on public display and in the line of fire. These active citizens bypass the conservative informational structures and in some cases even censorship, but are at the same time monitored and controlled by the authorities. Being overruled under the pretense of state security, speech is recorded, monitored, as well as punished. The Indonesian writer Imam Samroni stresses that, “what is secure for the nation-state is taken to mean true security for everyone, a highly dubious proposition” (in Poster 1995). If online democracy is consequently measured in terms of civil rights, than there is not much left of the optimistic promises of freedom of speech. Believing in the power of a distributed architecture of the Internet as a network of networks without central control is no longer true. Both the State authority and commercial considerations are subversively recollecting the Wild Wild Web. And even though we trust their products as empowering tools for spreading democracy, we are laying our trust in companies that might at some point turn their backs on its users and provide the State with any requested data. Dystopian scenarios

therefore remind us of Foucault's "panopticon", in which citizens are constantly watched (or believe they are being watched) and act accordingly. For now, however, it seems that people keep exposing any aspect of their lives, demolishing the boundaries between the public and the private, neglecting being surveilled and thus create their own "heterotopias" filled with every detail of their lives.

### Regarding the Status of Others

Regarding the status of others could therefore 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, 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 subjectivity of the image-makers. What Susan Sontag describes in her book "Regarding the Pain of Others" on war photography 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 transformed in an even more immediate narrative, written by "amateurs" of real life. Sontag claims, that such amateur pictures are "thought to be less manipulative" and possess a "special kind of authenticity" (2003, p.27). The latest suffering is nowadays 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 provokes a sympathy that in Susan Sontag's words "proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence" (Sontag 2003, p.102). She further notes it is this compassion that "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 but is also covered by main-stream media, hence building up pressure on international politics. The invention of the Leitmotif of a “Twitter Revolution” by the mainstream media is legitimizing their usage of individuals, who function as unpaid correspondents in the fields. What we experience is not a homogeneous space of a top-down power structure, but an intertwined hierarchy of platforms, providing us a selection of truths by different actors. Fluid forms of engagement allow individuals to appropriate the new digital tools for their purposes, however meaningful these might be. 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 can lead to more direct democratic practices and leave a noticeable impression on the political status of our societies.

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