DIGITISING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: TWO KEY ISSUES

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Abstract

The discussion on how democracy is affected by the introduction and functioning of digital media and the Internet has been going on for at least two decades. Starting from the perspective of democratic theory and specifically theories of the public sphere, this article tries to outline two key issues and what the current status of knowledge and debates on these appears to be. Referring to and drawing on all the other contributions to this issue of *Javnost—The Public*, the theoretical as well as the empirical, it is argued that while there is no doubt digitisation of the public sphere adds new dimensions and new forms of discourse, the implications of these for the overall quality or health of democracy are still quite differently understood by scholars working in these issues. Consequently, further theoretical work is required, but, perhaps even more important, a variety of empirical studies.

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The ongoing shift from analogue to digital communication technologies is taking place across a range of media outlets, social arenas and forms of expression. Democracy, understood as a comprehensive term encompassing both a form of government and a social system with certain cultural implications, is and has been affected in a variety of ways by this transition. One might for instance consider the ways in which digital communications have radically speeded up transactions and furthered the global integration of financial markets, or the uses of digital voting machines, or the effects of the Internet on the formation of identities among young people. At the heart of the issue, however, is the impact of digitisation on the social space known as the public sphere, in particular the dominant parts of this space that are constituted by mediated as opposed to face-to-face communication.

Discussions of digital media and democracy have been going on at least since 1990, with a variety of approaches and ideas involved. This issue of Javnost –The Public is an attempt to take stock of some of these debates. As the reader will notice, perceptions and understandings vary considerably among media, communication and political science scholars represented here.

The purpose of this article is, however, quite modest. It is only to point out and situate two key issues involved on the background of theories of democracy and, more specifically, of the public sphere. They are the issues of participation and structure. Starting with a presentation of some important elements in the history of the theory of the public sphere, the article tentatively formulates some premises for an evaluation of digitisation's effects on the media-related functions of democracy.

Its conclusion is that democratically highly relevant features of digital media, such as the possibility for interactivity or dialogue, or the danger of fragmentation of the public sphere in an indefinite number of specialised and isolated sub-spheres, have been exaggerated. In an historical view, these features or elements are not new with the digital age. The World Wide Web merely makes them more easily attained. The Internet is a fantastic addition to the media that already were of constitutive importance for the functioning of democracy. It should not be mystified, neither feared nor uncritically praised. Instead, the World Wide Web and its uses should be investigated critically and empirically in a theoretically informed way.

Individual Participation

The theory of the public sphere may seem to have started with Jürgen Habermas' book The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962/1989), particularly in parts of the literature that have followed the belated publication of the book's English translation in 1989.

Nevertheless, one might well say that the theoretical tradition that Habermas' classic belongs to got its start (as so much else did) in antiquity. The distinction between a public and a private sphere was first developed in ancient times and had its versions in the Middle Ages and in Early Modern times as well. The specifically modern notion of a public sphere, however, has its origins in the 18th century intellectual movement know as the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment philosophers interpreted the then emerging public sphere as a sphere of freedom and as a medium for the constitution of power in communication. An early contribution of particular significance was Immanuel Kant's letter to the Berlinische Monatsschrift in September of 1784, where he opened his answer to the question "what is Enlightenment" as follows:

> *Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! [Dare to know!] "Have courage to use your own understanding!" – that is the motto of enlightenment.* [1]

Kant thus formulated a vision of individuals enlightening themselves through the free communication of ideas and the public use of their common human reason. For him as for later liberal thinkers, laws and government more generally were to be legitimated through public justification and the consent of citizens assembled as a public. John Stuart Mill, for instance, understood parliamentarianism as a "government by discussion." This optimistic, liberal view, however, was soon met with sceptical assessments of the public sphere. It was feared that public opinion could turn into a tyranny of the majority. Mill himself feared that public opinion could threaten individual freedom, and argued that a liberal state must secure the freedom of opinion as an individual right, as a right against the majority and the state. His On Liberty (1859) is the classical defence of freedom of expression as a basic constitutional right in liberal democracies.

This focus on individuals enlightening themselves and each other while controlling government through the public use of reason was more difficult to maintain in the early twentieth century after industrialisation, urbanisation, mass organisations and mass media had thoroughly changed society and the conditions of public communication. In Jürgen Habermas' 1962 classic, the invasion of the public sphere by organised "private interests" in the sense of organised interests based in the private economic realm – including not least the labour movement and associated phenomena – was a central part of the structural change that turned the public sphere into a mere stage for pseudo debates while the real decisions are outcomes of tug-of-wars and wheeling and dealing that take place outside of public view. This is what Habermas called the refeudalisation of the public sphere, i.e. its return to a function as a stage for the representation of power and the proclamation of decisions, not for the making of those decisions through public discussion.

Between the first and the second world war there were a number of confrontations between the classic idea of a public sphere, based on the notion of the actively participating, enlightened individual and various empirically based conceptions of modern "mass" democracy. An age of political manipulation and propaganda challenged the idea of democracy as the self-government of well informed citizens. The famous debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey centred on this opposition.

Walter Lippmann (1925) voiced a pessimistic – what he called "realistic" – approach to democracy and the public sphere. He rejected the conception of the well informed citizen as a fiction in a mass society. In his opinion, the task of accomplishing a qualified understanding of public affairs should be left to specialists. Lippmann regarded the whole idea of a public sphere and an enlightened discourse as an illusion, a "phantom." In his view, public opinion would always be the result of the exercise of power and a "manufacturing of consent." John Dewey (1927), on the other hand, objected to what he called "the older theories" where democracy was considered to be a mere technical form of government with certain aspects of

infrastucture set firmly in place, such as general suffrage, elections and majority rule. This notion was linked to the concept that each individual should be equipped with the knowledge and competence to engage in political affairs – in short, what Lippmann called the "omnicompetent" individual. According to Dewey, however, democracy is rather "a way of life," one that comprises the way people live, work and learn together. What is needed for the people in a democracy is common knowledge, including the ability to discuss and to judge rationally. Such knowledge is a function of association and communication, of socially transmitted and sanctioned traditions and habits. It is different from scientific knowledge; instead, it is a task for the experts to present facts and their consequences to the public, who in turn discuss and judge what is best for the community.

While Dewey continues to inspire those who maintain the vision of the broadest possible participation of citizens as individuals in a public sphere where serious discussion forms the basis of government, there is also quite a strong tradition more or less in accordance with Lippmann's view. For instance, the economist Joseph Schumpeter (1942/2003) wanted to establish a "realistic" and empirically based model of democracy. Like Lippmann, Schumpeter took an elitist position on public life and attributed only a minor role to public participation and a correspondingly major role to political leadership. Schumpeter's argument for "leadership democracy" and "competitive elitism" implied a rejection of what he labelled "the classical doctrine of democracy" – the idea of a common good and the will of the people. The role of the people is to produce a government through election, and in fulfilling this responsibility, the role of public discussion is minimal. In this way of thinking, voting is the result of organised mass persuasion or manipulation, where the principles of marketing and advertising are followed. To the extent that a public sphere exists, it is thus more of a market than a forum. This latter distinction is underlying an opposition between two main models of democracy, as suggested by Jon Elster (1986/1997).

Elster opposes Schumpeter's view of democracy, which he calls the social choice model, to that of what we here might call Dewey's disciples, i.e. those in favour of deliberative democracy, where public discussion – guided by public reason, where the better argument rules – will be able to reach a consensus that can then become a premise for lawmaking. While Elster seems to sympathise with the latter, he nevertheless proceeds to criticise both social choice and the model of rational deliberation. In addition, he also objects to the ideal of participatory democracy, since it says, basically, that the reason why public debate is desirable is that it in itself educates people and produces more complete and wholesome citizens. Debate is, in this view, purely for reasons of discussion, and is not so much an instrument employed to solve a problem or to end a struggle or dispute.

But the governing of a society is about getting certain necessary things done, about solving specific problems and deciding about necessary concrete changes. The role of public discourse in this context is at least two-fold: It is to bring forward all (or as many as possible) of the existing views on the issue at hand in society (a representational function), and in doing so, it is thereby helping to identify the essential facts and concerns of the matter (an epistemological function).

What runs through the history of idealistic normative theorisations of the public sphere, then, is a preoccupation with the participation of active, knowledgeable,

individual citizens. The realistic – sceptical or outright cynical – contributions to the tradition appear as such because they do not believe such citizens exist in a sufficient number, and/or are not sufficiently knowledgeable, and/or do not have sufficient integrity to be able to constitute a basis for democratic government. The idealistic contributions would tend to emphasise that integrity and knowledge are conquered in principle by anyone once they actually decide to become involved, but also that there is no definite dividing line between the competent and the incompetent. The Bildung or education needed in a truly participatory democracy is always in process, never complete or finished. There is no way an individual citizen can master the exact knowledge that underlies specific governmental decisions pertaining to all sorts of issues. On the other hand, citizens may, as was suggested by Michael Schudson (1998, 311) participate in a "monitorial" role, such as how parents watch over their children at a community swimming pool:

> *Monitorial citizens tend to be defensive rather than proactive. They are perhaps better informed than citizens of the past in that, somewhere in their heads, they have more bits of information, but there is no assurance that they know at all what to do with what they know. They have no more virtue than citizens of the past – but no less either.*
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> *The monitorial citizen engages in environmental surveillance more than information gathering. Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene. They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required.*

This metaphor indicates a way in which a somewhat modified idea of the individual competent citizen may well be defendable even today. It also shows how public political activity is an always-available option rather than a constantly realised one. This is worth keeping in mind, especially in encounters with the view that active contributions to public discourse are the criterion of being a member of a public at all; as Peter Dahlgren once put it:

> *In terms of the dimension of interaction, it may be useful to recall Habermas as well as other writers, such as Dewey (1954), who argue that a "public" should be conceptualized as something other than just a media audience. Publics, according to Habermas and Dewey, exist as discursive interactional processes; atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public. With the advent of the public opinion industry (cf. Splichal, 1999; Lewis, 2001), the focus on aggregate statistics of individual views became established. While such approaches do have their uses, it is imperative not to lose sight of the classic idea that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other. This is certainly the basic premise of those versions of democratic theory that see deliberation as fundamental* (Dahlgren 2005, 149).

There is no doubt whatsoever that the digitisation of media, not least television, and especially the development of the Internet, has considerably increased the possibility for individual citizens to participate actively in public discourse. The question is how to estimate the degree to which it has changed and the degree to which it actually changes the nature of the public sphere. One of the scholars

who have most energetically underscored the democratic potential of the Internet is Yochai Benkler in his The Wealth of Networks (2006). According to him, people who have been "mostly passive recipients of mediated information" (p. 220) now have radically different possibilities:

> *We are witnessing a fundamental change in how individuals can interact with their democracy and experience their role as citizens. Ideal citizens need not be seen purely as trying to inform themselves about what others have found, so that they can vote intelligently. They need not be limited to reading the opinions of opinion makers and judging them in private conversations. They are no longer constrained to occupy the role of mere readers, viewers, and listeners. They can be, instead, participants in a conversation. … The network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes* (Benkler 2006, 272).

This sort of stance was voiced early on by various postmodern theorists, such as Mark Poster (1997). According to Poster, the Internet is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolisations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralises the positions of speech, publishing, film-making, radio and television broadcasting – in short, the apparatuses of cultural production (1997, 211).

Such enthusiastic celebrations of the Internet tend to forget that powerful forms of direct public expression of views or experiences from "ordinary people" actually have a long and interesting history with little or nothing to do with digitisation. Decades of telephone-based radio programs, letters, demonstrations, letters-to-the-editor, mobilisation of the press in particular issues, organising consumer boycotts, and vox pop interviews in TV programs as well as the scores of other ways that both radio and television in most of their history have established dialogues with their audiences are also forgotten in most of the literature that is preoccupied with active participation online.

This said, it is true that the Internet, together with digital technologies for writing, photography, sound recording and more, has lowered the threshold for new entrants into the realm of cultural production in different media. The significant expansion of the number of producers is important, particularly since these producers can distribute their products on the Internet for no cost or at the very least, low cost and thus, in principle, can reach a more or less large anonymous audience – as if by broadcasting.

Despite all the touted power of the Internet, is its potential ever to be fully realised? What about the socially important digital divide? Will it deepen already existing social cleavages in terms of democratic participation (Norris 2001)? Furthermore, what about the simple physical limitations to total participation? As polemically calculated and argued by Benjamin E. Page (1996), if for example a nation of 250 million citizens devoted 24 hours to fully equal collective discussion of some political issue, each citizen would get less than 0.0004 of one second to talk. If all were to talk for 2 minutes, it would take 950 years for all to speak.

Nonetheless, the ideal of individual citizens' participation is still very much alive and may well be worth keeping, as there are now greatly increased possibilities for ordinary (and extraordinary) people to express themselves and/or their opinions

online. But this does not at all reduce the importance of issues of representation and the forces that regulate who gets to speak where to whom under what circumstances about what. Individual activity as 'senders' and 'producers' is clearly positive, but it does not mean there is no need for professionally produced and edited media, whether audiovisual or print.

Bernhard Peters (1994) added another worry to the possibilities for greatly increased participation in public discourse through new media. He pointed out that if more people are allowed to speak, the discussion must necessarily become more fragmented. This appears more worrisome than, for example, the fact that many of the newcomers to public discourse will have limited knowledge of the issues at hand and perhaps little respect for rules of argumentation in public debates. In fact, changing structural features of the public sphere, first put forward by Habermas in his 1962 work, may be the most serious threat to the well-being of the public sphere.

Structural Changes

The empirical version of the 'classic' bourgeois public sphere – to the extent that it existed – was first characterised structurally by there being only a few participants. The two criteria for full participation were, besides gender, property and education in the sense of Bildung. Women and servants, and other people considered to be of lower class, could participate to some extent in the cultural or literary public sphere if they were literate (most people were not at the time), but they were not allowed entry into the political public sphere. The number of publications was similarly low, and coffeehouses and other related venues where one could actually meet most participants in public discourse face-to-face were not frequented by women and the lower classes.

The establishment of public school systems, the spread of literacy, the growth of industries and the emergence of associations characteristic of industrial capitalism greatly increased the number of participants in public discourse. A completely new and much more complex structure came into being, one in which there was not only the shift toward "refeudalisation" as noted and defined by Habermas, but also a plurality of public spheres. While the government and the parliamentary assembly continued to mark a definite centre in the political public sphere, and institutions such as national theatres were centres in the cultural public sphere, a new social complexity and its associated multitudes of informal social spaces and formalised organisations constituted a new, similarly multifarious set of public spheres known as 'civil society'. The union, the tee-total society, the party, the suffragette club, the sports club, the religious and missionary associations, all had their meetings, and many also had a variety of publications in genres ranging from drama and poetry to educational prose and political propaganda.

Many of these organisations and their internal public spheres were parts of greater, more comprehensive formations such as the labour movement, the Christian grass-roots movement and the like. To the extent that their members were excluded from full participation in the central political and/or cultural public sphere, through suffrage laws in the political and sheer social prejudice in the cultural realm, they would often tend to regard themselves as being training camps and waiting rooms for aspiring future members. On the other hand, more radical and utopian

movements could see themselves as a public sphere more permanently located outside of the 'establishment' while envisioning a central role for themselves in the New Society's reconstructed public sphere (cf Gripsrud 1981 and 1997).

It was in this social situation that broadcasting was introduced in the 1920s; as an institution (and in the US as an industry) it provided a much more pronounced, centralised or pyramidal structure to the overarching, in most cases national, public sphere. At the same time, however, it also made it much more inclusive, soon reaching every corner of each country with both national and international programming. If one looks at the way social democratic and socialist labour movement songs and other texts praised the radio between the world wars, it is striking to note how the rank-and-file members of these organisations may have experienced radio's inclusion of them in its audience as a foreboding of and metaphor for their later full inclusion in society and its public sphere.

Between, roughly, 1950 and 1980, television clearly contributed to further centralisation in the overarching public sphere. Still, social complexity was by no means reduced. Suffice it to mention the migratory movements to countries in Western Europe. Consequently, the number and variety of public sub-spheres were also increasing.

From about 1980 on, though, satellite and cable television (and radio, for that matter) thoroughly changed the broadcasting system, with the aid of neo-liberal de- or re-regulation. In the US as in Western Europe, a handful of channels that formerly assembled the entire population were now competing with up to a hundred others, some thematically specialised, others targeting certain ethnic groups.

By the time the World Wide Web was opened to ordinary folks in the mid 1990s, the public spheres of at least the Western world had already been pluralised and segmented since the second half of the nineteenth century, and in the second half of the twentieth century not least by satellite and cable television. Thus, further segmentation by the Web was not such a radical leap. This was rarely explicitly reflected on in writings of the time, however, which tended to express worries over fragmentation of the public sphere stemming from the infinity of "public sphericules" (Gitlin 1998) facilitated by the World Wide Web:

> *Does the proliferation of the latter ["separate public sphericules"], the comfort in which they can be cultivated, damage the prospects of the former ["a public sphere"]? Does it not look as if the public sphere, in falling, had shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury? The diffusion of interactive technology surely enriches the possibilities for a plurality of publics – for the development of distinct groups organized around affinity and interest. What is not clear is that the proliferation and lubrication of publics contributes to the creation of a public – an active democratic encounter of citizens who reach across their social and ideological differences to establish a common agenda of concern and to debate rival approaches* (Gitlin 1998, 173).

While Gitlin was quite relaxed in his reasoning on the possible implications of the proliferation of online communities, Cass Sunstein was less so in his influential Republic.com (2002) and Republic.com 2.0 (2007). Sunstein argued there are two features that are necessary for a public sphere to function well: People (participants) must be exposed to views, perspectives and experiences that they would not voluntarily have chosen to be exposed to, and many or most of the participants

must have "a range of common experiences" (Sunstein 2007, 5-6). On the former point, Sunstein refers not least to social psychological studies showing that isolated groups of like-minded people – i.e. people shielded from counter-arguments and alternative views – tend to develop a consensus around standpoints that are extreme versions of the views they share. The latter point is about the part played by (some degree of) shared identity in the establishment of a true dialogue and a possibility for (some degree of) consensus. It may be seen as at once referring to Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities (1983/1991) on the development of national identity not least through more or less simultaneously shared media experiences and to Raymond Williams' ideas about the identity-producing role of broadcasting in his Broadcasting: Technology and Cultural Form (1975).

Sunstein's points are valid in an abstract kind of way, and thus useful as warnings against undesirable possibilities for a "cyberbalkanisation" in the now established digital system of public communications. But he seems to overlook the overwhelming evidence that thoroughly isolated groups such as those he imagines are and will be at most very marginal phenomena. If we in the 1990s had a highly complex social and cultural landscape and a similarly complex media system with a hundred or more television channels as one important element, there was still a sense of central focus provided by the national political institutions and the still dominant (if less so) handful of broadcasting channels, which was further supported by a few leading newspapers. Furthermore, there are schools, sports, neighbourhoods and any number of other sources of shared information and experience. For that matter, one might think back to the one piece of media and communication research regularly mentioned in textbooks of most social science courses: the two-step flow of communication thesis (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) which was all about the importance of local communities, contradicting a widespread overestimation of how atomistic and mobile people had become in modern societies. It is not only that such communities exist. People also want and need them. And, importantly, as indicated by the survival and quite reasonable health of so many public service television channels in Western Europe and the Big Three television networks in the US (ABC, NBC, and CBS), people still want and need a community at a national or nation-state level.

Consequently, we are most probably a long way from the death of an overarching, central public sphere, especially in Western Europe but also elsewhere. It is however now obliged to co-exist with a number of other and partially competing public spheres. At the same time, it is also likely that both the central public sphere and various public 'sphericules' are in fact often working together or in parallel. Gitlin in fact suggested this in his 1998 article: that "segmented assemblies … do loosely interrelate, in a parallel sphere of liberal-pluralist diversity", as put by David Holmes (2005, 76). This idea resembles an understanding of the notion of a European public sphere, which is now defined in the scholarly literature as a space where national public spheres make up the infrastructure but where there is more or less simultaneous discourse on European issues, or, as a space which is "a pluralistic ensemble of issue-oriented publics that exist once the same issues are discussed simultaneously and within a shared frame of relevance" (Lingenberg 2006, 123, quoting Eder and Kantner 2000,135). Both the coherence of specialised public sphericules with the general public sphere and the coherence of multichan-

nel national public spheres in multiethnic societies can arguably be maintained along similar lines.

The significant expansion of the number of producers is absolutely an important development – particularly since these producers can distribute their products on the Internet for no cost or at a very low price and so actually reach an audience. While people have always photographed, played the guitar, made amateur movies and had all kinds of culturally productive hobbies, they have never before had the possibility now offered by the Internet to have their products exhibited to anonymous audiences of varying sizes.

It can be done on a range of individually managed Web sites, or it can be done on privately owned and operated collective sites like YouTube. In both cases, it clearly resembles broadcasting. Not only is the one-to-many structure there, but much of what one finds there are excerpts from television programs. In the case of YouTube, it is also a question worth investigating whether people who watch the clips there primarily experience these clips as messages from the individuals who uploaded them or as offerings from YouTube, which could also be referred to as the world's leading "video station." My nine-year old daughter is clearly in the latter category, and so am I, most of the time.

Most Internet traffic these days is going to sites owned and run by major institutions or corporations. Already in 2001, forty-five percent of the top five Web sites in 26 countries were affiliated with Microsoft, according to an analysis of Nielsen's NetRatings data (Lake 2001). In today's Norway, six out of the ten most popular Web sites (as measured by the number of individual users each day) are owned by the same, nationally dominant and internationally active media corporation, Schibsted. And here is Nielsen's Net Ratings list of the ten parent companies of the most visited Web sites from people's homes (as opposed to work – the data come from Nielsen's "home panel") in January 2008:

Table 1: Top 10 Parent Companies of the Most Visited Web Sites in the United States (January 2008, Home Panel)

Parent Name	Unique Audience (000)	Reach %	Time Per Person
Google	105,519	69.88	01:01:30
Microsoft	102,181	67.67	01:27:24
Yahoo!	94,691	62.71	02:18:53
Time Warner	85,433	56.58	03:00:45
News Corp. Online	60,268	39.91	01:54:34
eBay	50,358	33.35	01:25:51
InterActiveCorp	46,920	31.07	00:18:25
Amazon	40,396	26.75	00:19:46
Apple Computer	37,828	25.05	01:08:08
Wikimedia Foundation	37,058	24.54	00:16:43

Source: http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/resources.jsp?section=pr_netv&nav=1

In other words, it has been a while since the Internet was primarily about grassroots communication and participatory culture. The concentration of capital

and competence that is so characteristic of media markets generally now also structures much of the Internet. In addition to the really big corporate players in the US, Europe, Japan and elsewhere, there are the banks, the insurance companies, the oil companies, the car companies, the hotels, the restaurants and so on, not to mention smart business initiatives that only exist on the Net, such as Second Life. Overall, it has been estimated that "90 percent of all Web pages are for financial gain" (Schuler 2004, 69). Even the smaller Web sites that are not necessarily profit-oriented get a large portion of their maintenance funding through ad hosting and affiliate marketing (where a visitor to their site can click on an ad that takes them to another site – typically a large retailer such as eBay, Amazon.com, or Overstock.com – and if the visitor makes a purchase, the original click-through site receives a bit of affiliate-marketing revenue).

Then there are all the big sites based in the public or non-profit civil society sector: government sites, the universities, the museums and so on. After all of this is theoretically removed from the scene, what remains as a space for non-profit newcomers with a mission is very limited. It really is not very easy to reach a larger audience on the Internet without somehow achieving cooperation with one or more of the big players.

The Web Is Fantastic

The critical points mentioned in this article naturally do not cover all that the Internet entails. The fact remains that the Web offers previously inconceivable opportunities for making available to a public any kind of cultural product or political utterance a person chooses to put forth; it is an amazing vehicle for communicating and organising across great distances and even on a global scale; it is incomparable for accessing enormous cultural resources such as archives, museums, internationally renowned newspapers and other media; and with Google's initiative to have every book on the planet digitised and accessible online, eventually we will have a library available to the entire world at our fingertips.

It therefore seems obvious to me that it adds historically new and highly valuable forms of 'publicness' to the traditional public sphere. I am not thinking so much of the ways in which previously private, personal matters are now made public (even if some of that may be relevant as well); rather, it is the informed discussions, the direct forms of communication, the easy availability of the means of visual and aural/musical communication in addition to the written or printed matter so easily accessible that creates this new realm of publicness. The Internet is of course the most overwhelmingly big encyclopaedia that has ever existed, and even if those who are already information-rich benefit the most from this, the less advantaged may also enjoy the availability of these treasures.

The Web does not warrant mystification, uncritical celebration or prejudiced condemnations. It deserves innumerable serious, theoretically informed, multifaceted, multi-method empirical investigations.

Note:

1. Here quoted from http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html.

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