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**The Internet and the Public Sphere: A Critical
Analysis of the Possibility of Online Discourse
Enhancing Deliberative Democracy**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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The Internet and the Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis of the Possibility of Online Discourse Enhancing Deliberative Democracy

Abstract

The advent of the Internet has prompted a range of arguments about the political significance of new communications technologies. Some claim that the Internet offers a means by which to facilitate deliberative democracy. Such arguments point to an affinity between cyber-interactions and the notion of the public sphere. The two-way, decentralized communications of cyberspace are held to constitute sites of rational deliberation that are autonomous from state and economic interests. This thesis examines the extent to which the Internet does in fact enhance the public sphere and identifies ways in which it can be enabled to do so more effectively. Existing Internet practices are compared with a normative conception of the public sphere that draws upon Habermas' theory of communicative action and his analysis of the relations between system and lifeworld. Investigation at the system's level shows that state and corporate interests have placed extensive restrictions upon Internet access and autonomy. However, despite such restrictions many thousands of people continue to interact through non-commercial and non-governmental online spaces. Analysis of these everyday interactions identifies tendencies that facilitate the extension of the public sphere at large. These tendencies are further encouraged by a number of Internet projects that explicitly attempt to promote deliberative democracy. Through case study analysis, I show how such initiatives are able to structure online discourse to more fully approximate the public sphere conception. Unfortunately, participants within these online deliberative fora are representative of no more than a small and privileged sector of the offline population. Moreover, online discursive spaces are increasingly sidelined or incorporated by commercialized and privatized forms of interaction and political practice. In order to overcome such impediments, we must foster the political will towards deliberation that already exists within both cyber-interactions and the wider civil society. If the present Internet is to enhance the public sphere, online rational discourse must be protected, resourced, and linked to offline deliberative publics.

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To mum and dad with love

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