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

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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

Short Table of Contents

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1 Introduction: The Internet and the Public Sphere

1.1 The Age of Democracy, the Internet, and the Public Sphere

The idea of democracy – 'rule by the people' – has spread across the globe in the twentieth century, it has gained adherents, consolidated, and in many places become a hegemonic discourse. As Held (1996:xi, 1) says, 'democracy has become the fundamental standard of political legitimacy in the current era . . . . Political regimes of all kinds throughout the world describe themselves as democracies.' No longer is one for or against democracy itself; rather, one can only be for or against a particular form of democracy. The success of the democratic idea, however, has not secured the success of democratic practice. Democracy remains fragile and vulnerable throughout the world. Problems such as corruption, the non-transparency of decision-making processes, hierarchical power distribution, and voter apathy are endemic in many so-called democratic nations, while major set-backs to the development of democratic rule have been encountered over the last decade in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.

Communications and information technologies have also grown and spread in the twentieth century, and these technologies have been part of both the successes and the failures of democracy in modern times. They have played an important role in the democratization of Eastern Europe and East Timor, for example, and have often helped to consolidate democracy in Western nations. However, the use of media technologies has not always led to greater democatization. In many cases, media technologies have simply become a means for privatized communication and political publicity, as has largely been the case with radio and television. At worst, these communications media have been utilized to legitimate the power of totalitarian regimes.

Despite the varied historical record, each new communications and information technology, from the telegraph to digital television, seems to fuel fresh hopes for greater democratization. Now the Internet is being seen by many commentators as a means by which democracy can be strengthened. The Internet provides a global, low cost, and nearly instantaneous system of two-way communications, a system that promises greater freedom of assembly and information access and thus a means of global democratization. The 'information surperhighways' developing from the Internet, Al Gore (1994) claims, will 'promote the

functioning of democracy by enhancing the participation of citizens in decision making'; they will enable 'a new Athenian Age of democracy.' Such claims are not just made by populist writers and politicians. The Internet, respected critical theorist Douglas Kellner (1998:174) writes, has

> produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas.

As well as pointing to the general political potential of the Internet, Kellner's statement indicates the emergence of a *deliberative* position within cyber-democracy rhetorics and practices. This position views the Internet as enhancing the public sphere of rational-critical discourse, discourse that forms democratic public opinion by which policy makers can be held accountable for their decisions. The relationship between the Internet and this public sphere is the focus of this thesis.

The deliberative vision offers a 'strong' model of democratic politics. It takes seriously the question of how to respectfully live with difference within modern pluralist societies, emphasizing the need for political discourse that develops understanding between subjects. However, there has been little systematic empirical investigation of the possibility that the two-way, decentralized communications of cyberspace may invigorate democratic deliberations. In this thesis I aim to rectify this gap. I ask how the Internet can enhance the public sphere. This is both an empirical and a normative problematic. The research task involves evaluating the extent to which the Internet is enhancing public deliberation and identifying ways in which it can be used to do so more. This combination of empirical and normative objectives is in keeping with a critical research tradition that not only looks to describe the world but also aims to change it. I argue that such a task can be productively explored via Habermas' critical theory and its surrounding debates. A strong proponent of deliberative democracy, Habermas points to a normative basis of the public sphere within modernity and thereby provides a critical conception which can be used to evaluate online practices.

This chapter introduces my approach to the Internet-public sphere problematic. I firstly outline the most important technological 'tools' that facilitate communication through the Internet. I then sketch out some of the rhetorics and practices of three dominant electronic democracy camps: liberal individualist, communitarian, and deliberative. This sketch provides the context for a more detailed consideration of the deliberative democracy position

in relation to the Internet-public sphere question. I explain my interest in the deliberative model and introduce the Habermasian-influenced critical theory framework that will be employed in this thesis to investigate the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere.

1.2 Internet Tools

The Internet is a network of computer networks linked by high speed conduits and communications protocols that enable different computers to talk to each other. But it is more than just an assembly of technological hardware and software.[1] The millions of people communicating everyday through the Internet make it a significant social and cultural phenomenon. This interaction is established via a number of different communication and information media. The most important of these for public interaction and information sharing are e-mail, e-mail lists, electronic bulletin boards, electronic chat, MUDs, and the World Wide Web.

- E-Mail and E-Mail Lists

Electronic mail is the most basic and popular communications media of the Internet. It can be one-to-one, or one-to-many, or many-to-many. E-mail lists enable the many-to-many function to operate efficiently. Thousands of public e-mail lists can be found online and subscribed to by anyone with access to the Internet.[2] E-mail lists are driven by a 'listserv' program that performs a number of functions including automatically distributing messages to all those subscribed. While some e-mail lists are set up as broadcast media allowing only certain subscribers the privilege of posting messages, most allow all subscribers to post and reply, thus enabling the development of an asynchronous electronic forum in which participants do not need to be present at the same time.

[1] Given that my focus is upon the spaces of communication online and not the technological artefact, I will not provide an extensive overview of Internet technology. I will discuss technical aspects as required during the thesis, particularly when looking at the Internet's social history and political economy. For a thorough and accessible account of the technical aspects central to the Internet as a socio-cultural phenomenon, see Abbate (1999). More concise overviews can be found in Kitchen (1998) and Rheingold (1993).

[2] For an extensive listing of public e-mail lists, see http://www.liszt.com (last accessed 21/1/00). There are also many thousands of private and institutionally-based e-mail lists.

- Electronic Bulletin Boards

The Internet carries thousands of electronic bulletin boards which, like e-mail lists, involve asynchronous discussion. As the name indicates, electronic bulletin boards (also called conferencing systems) operate in a similar fashion to traditional bulletin boards. Messages are 'posted' to a 'board' – a memory space held on a computer server – for others to read and reply to at their convenience. As messages are replied to, what are called 'threads' of messages build up. Although threads develop in relation to linear time, any message within a thread can be read and answered without one having to read preceding topics and messages. A complex set of discussions trailing off in many directions can thus develop from a single post. This all takes place only if a participant decides to go to the board to get ('pull') messages. In comparison, e-mail list messages are sent ('pushed') automatically to subscribers' e-mail boxes so that every message must be dealt with in some fashion (deleted, read, or replied to). In other words, a bulletin board is a 'pull' media while an e-mail list is a 'push' media.

As well as on the Internet, computer conferencing systems are run through local area networks (for example, university systems) and commercial systems (for example, America Online). The most famous and largest public computer conferencing system is Usenet, a global network of electronic bulletin boards called newsgroups that pre-dates but is now accessible via the Internet. Usenet is the third most popular medium on the Internet after e-mail and Web browsing (Smith, 1999:196-197). Tens of thousands of people worldwide participate in thousands of these online groups which cover a very wide range of topics. The system is organized around a set of hierarchies (or 'domains') of topically-structured newsgroups which enable people to easily browse through and find the groups of interest to them. The main hierarchies or 'domains' are alt (for alternative), biz (business), comp (computer), gov (government), misc (miscellaneous), rec (recreation), sci (science), soc (society), and talk (general). Each of these domains has its own sub-domains which branch out to newsgroups.[3] The sheer volume of traffic passing through Usenet means that messages are often only stored on servers for a few days, depending upon the popularity of the newsgroup.

[3] An example of how the Usenet hierarchy operates: soc = domain name, soc.culture = sub domain soc.culture.french = newsgroup with postings relevant to French culture. For a more detailed description of Usenet and Usenet hierarchy, see Smith (1999) and "What_Is_Usenet" on http://www.news.newusers.questions (last accessed 12/7/99).

- Electronic Chat

A 'chat room' is a multi-user, real-time tele-conference in which users post text messages to ongoing conversations that scroll down the computer screen. Similar to citizen band (CB) radio but unlike e-mail lists or bulletin boards, online chat appears synchronous and no records of conversation are kept. Each time a participant enters a chat session, they must start off without knowledge of who has been saying what. To make things more confusing, many conversations can take place within a chat room at the same time. Participants themselves often engage in more than one conversation, posting to one group while waiting for replies to their previous messages in other groups.

- MUDs

Like electronic chat, a Multi-User Domain (MUD) involves synchronous text-based interaction, but this takes place within a themed virtual environment.[4] 'Players' interact with others in the same 'room' by sending text messages that can include what a player is feeling and thinking. Players are often able to create their own identities and even 'objects.' Although mostly based upon adventure and fantasy role-playing games, many MUDs are now oriented towards maintaining social contact between people with shared interests.

- World Wide Web

The Web is a multimedia information system that allows users to download (to the user's hard drive) files stored on the databases of computers linked to the Internet. Each file or document or 'page' is given a URL (universal resource location) that enables it to be located and retrieved. Anyone can store information on the Web provided they gain access to space on one of the computers (servers) linked directly to the Internet. Documents are written in hypertext mark-up language (HTML) which enables documents to contain links to other documents. A user can link to other Web pages by clicking their mouse on highlighted words, icons, and images on the page they are viewing. Searching through the Web for documents is enabled by Web browsers that provide an interface to hypertext documents.

[4] Online multi-user interactive themed environments also come in the form of multiple object-oriented spaces (MOOs) or multiple user social hosts (MUSHes) or multiple user social environments (MUSEs). 'The differences between these acronyms are mainly concerned with how each is programmed and the sort of interaction achievable in each. For example, a MUD is programmed to contain certain features, which would be textually described to a person entering a room, while a MOO allows participants to alter and create environments, and to assign meanings and values to objects, which are then stored in a large database for future users' (Kitchen, 1998:7). For a fuller description of MUDing, see Curtis (1997) and Rheingold (1993).

As well as information transmission, the Web now supports both asynchronous discussion groups and synchronous chat, integrating images and sound into previously text-only communication environments. Web browsers now also act as the interface for e-mail, e-mail lists, bulletin boards, MUDs, and chat. Moreover, data-bases of e-mail lists and bulletin boards can often be searched via the Web. As such, the Web is linking up all other Internet media into one integrated system. The Web, Cunningham (1998) argues, is 'the first truly converged medium.'

These various forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on the Internet make up part of what is now commonly referred to as cyberspace. Cyberspace is the social dimension constituted through electronically-mediated communication (telephone, CB radio, Internet, and so on). Rather than interlocutors being physically co-present, a 'virtual co-presence' is established. However, I avoid using the binary opposition cyberspace/real life because I see relations through cyberspace as being just as 'real' as any other aspects of everyday life; they are just differently mediated. Instead, I speak of cyberspacial versus face-to-face interactions, online as opposed to offline interactions, and CMC in contrast to other forms of mediated communication.[5]

As a communicatively constituted domain, cyberspace overlaps with Habermas' (1996:360) understanding of the public sphere:

> the public sphere distinguishes itself through a communicative structure . . . [I]t refers . . . to the social space generated in communicative action.

This parallel emphasis on communication supports those who claim that an affinity exists between online interaction and the public sphere conception. It also indicates the possibility of utilizing Habermas' work to conceptualize the latter. Before exploring this possibility, I need to fully define the research question and highlight the associated field. In order to do this, I will outline and contrast the dominant Internet-democracy rhetorics and practices, showing how they fall into three broad 'camps': liberal individualist, communitarian, and deliberative.[6]

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[5] 'Online' generally refers to communication through computers that are linked by various types of cables to the Internet. However, like the term cyberspace, 'online' could also be used to refer to any two-way, electronically-mediated communications.

[6] These camps must be distinguished from the individual positions held by those who become associated with each. That is, electronic democrats may draw upon a mixture of democratic models.

1.3 The Internet and Electronic Democracy: Three Alternatives

Electronic democracy is not new.[7] Each communications technology developed seems to spark a wave of enthusiasm regarding the potential of electronic communications to fundamentally transform democracy. Like earlier incarnations of electronic democracy rhetoric, claims about the Internet's democratic potential vary considerably. In this section I explore some of these claims and their related practices. In particular, I want to show how Internet-democracy positions link to three existing electronic democracy camps: liberal individualist, communitarian, and deliberative. Liberal individualist assumptions, promoting the expression of individual interests, dominate electronic democracy rhetoric and practice, but they do not go unopposed. Communitarian ideas, stressing the importance of communal values and bonds, are often invoked by electronic democrats resistant to liberal individualism. Moreover, a third democratic model, deliberative democracy, is increasingly being drawn upon by those seeking to utilize the Internet to bring about effective citizen participation in politics.

In order to set the scene, I will begin my overview with a brief consideration of the New Left's championing of new technology for democratic politics. I will then develop an outline of each of the three camps, indicating how each promotes particular aspects of the New Left's vision of electronic democracy. This outline will enable me to do three things: to situate the deliberative position in the general context of electronic democracy rhetoric and practice, to demonstrate the deliberative position's strength, and finally to introduce the research problematic of this thesis.

1.3.1 Setting the Scene: The New Left and Electronic Democracy

The events of May 1968 and the aspirations of the New Left provide a useful point of departure for my sketch of contemporary electronic democracy rhetoric and practice, providing a dramatic case of the intersection between a new communications media and a democratic movement. The electronic media were central to the democratic uprising in Paris, helping to transform 'a limited student protest into a general strike' (Barbrook, 1995:94-95). These events stimulated the development of New Left ideals about the role of

[7] I use the term 'electronic democracy' to encompass all those rhetorics and practices that refer to the use and impact of electronic media technologies (from the telegraph to the satellite) in democratic processes. I use the term 'Internet-democracy' specifically in relation to those rhetorics and practices that refer to the role of the Internet in democratic processes. By electronic media technologies I mean those media that utilize electronics (the transmission of electrons over distance) to mediate communication.

the electronic media in democratic society. Against the socialist left's statist orientation, the New Left promoted direct democracy based upon decentralization, dialogical communication, and radical pluralism (Aronowitz, 1996; Barbrook, 1995). It embraced the counter-cultural and new social movements which were seen as embodying radical democratic ideals. The New Left critiqued one-dimensional class analysis, but did not abandon political economy (Aronowitz, 1993). Economic organization and democracy were seen as inextricably linked. For the New Left, radical democracy demanded community control and ownership of key social institutions. This included the electronic media, which became a central focus of New Left aspirations. Independent, self-managed, two-way radio and (cable) television would enable universal direct participation in political and social decision making at both local and national levels (Barbrook, 1995:95). Self-managed media would be a first step towards the creation of direct democracy within all social institutions (Barbrook, 1995:100).

In Italy and France from the mid-1970s the rise of independent radio stations became a focus for radical democrats. Felix Guattari, himself personally involved in the Italian and French radical media movements, saw the 'free radio phenomenon' as undermining hierarchy and allowing voice for all. 'Direct speech' through independent media was seen as paving the way for direct democracy. According to Guattari (1996:75-76), free radio

> fundamentally endangers traditional systems of social representation, it puts in doubt a certain conception of the delegate, the representative, the authorized spokesman, the leader, the journalist . . . . It is as if, in some immense, permanent meeting place – given the size of the potential audience – anyone, even the most hesitant, those with the weakest voices, suddenly has the possibility of expressing themselves whenever they want. In these conditions, one can expect certain truths to find a new matter of expression.

In practice, New Left radio and cable television stations struggled to survive financially and steadily lost audience support to the slick commercial operations that developed in the 1980s. In France, a centre for New Left electronic democracy ideals, the free radio stations found that 'most listeners did not want to participate in the programme-making and management', undermining the radical vision of all participating in two-way communications over the airways (Barbrook, 1995:111). In North America, community access channels turned out to be anything but counter-cultural, and often succumbed to professionalization and commercialization (Surman, 1994:5, 8-9). By the mid-eighties, New Left aspirations for independent self-managed media and direct democracy had all but

collapsed along with the momentum of the New Left as a whole (Aronowitz, 1993:6; Barbrook, 1995:112).

The New Left partly undid itself through internal divisions, particularly over issues of gender and ethnicity (Aronowitz, 1996:92). Many of those dissatisfied with the movement's blindness to these issues embraced identity politics. In addition, the ideal of the media enabling a revolutionary form of society-wide, direct democracy was abandoned. Instead, the electronic media were generally posited as a tool for strengthening the political voice of disadvantaged groups within liberal democracy.

Despite the demise of the New Left media movement, its ideals have been taken up to various degrees in contemporary forms of electronic democracy. An emphasis upon direct political expression, the bypassing of the mass media and other intermediary institutions, remains popular with teledemocrats and other individualist models of electronic democracy. Community control and self-management are important to communitarian projects. Enabling all citizens to express their concerns in a space outside state or corporate control is central to the deliberative vision. I will now look at each of these three camps in turn. In each case I will draw together overlapping democratic visions, electronic democracy practices, and Internet-democracy rhetorics and practices.

1.3.2 The Liberal Individualist Camp

As the New Left waned, a new breed of (predominantly North American) electronic democrats emerged espousing the use of new technologies for direct political expression. They promoted the idea of teledemocracy: individuals governing directly from their armchairs via the use of telecommunications media.[8]

One of the most famous early examples that the teledemocrats draw upon in order to show the viability of their vision is the Qube experiment. Qube was a commercial, interactive cablecasting system that operated in Columbus Ohio between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s. Households subscribing to Qube could respond to questions raised in programmes, including public affairs shows, via a small black box with five buttons connected to the

[8] Teledemocracy is sometimes used more inclusively to describe any form of electronic democracy (see Tehranian 1990:114). At other times the term is reserved specifically for electronic democracy of the direct-plebiscitory form (Arterton 1987:196). My own use is a modification of the latter. Teledemocracy promotes the direct participation of citizens in decision making through the use of communications media as conduits for the expression and aggregation of individual opinions.

television set (Becker, 1981:6). Futurologist guru Alvin Toffler (1981:439) celebrated this system as a sign of things to come:

> this is only the first, most primitive indication of tomorrow's potential for direct democracy. Using advanced computers, satellites, telephones, cable, polling techniques, and other tools, an educated citizenry can, for the first time in history, begin making many of its own political decisions.

Qube provided the basic technology for one of teledemocracy's main ideas, the 'electronic town meeting.' These meetings generally combine cable television coverage of public meetings with televoting (normally via telephone). A central criticism of this model is that people are not able to make informed decisions simply by viewing a telecast meeting. To overcome this problem, Becker (1981) and Slaton (1992) have promoted a model of the electronic town meeting that they call 'Televote', or 'scientific random informed public opinion polling.' Rather than instant voting on issues raised via cable television, this model supplies information on the topic concerned to a 'scientifically' produced sample of the population well before the televote. In this way, it is argued, voters are provided with the necessary time and resources to make 'informed' decisions.[9]

Computer networks have been used only to a limited extent in teledemocracy projects. These networks offer the two-way, instantaneous communications that teledemocrats desire but they have yet to match cable television and other mass media in audience numbers. As a result, they have generally been used in tandem with other teledemocracy tools. Becker, for instance, is involved in the Electronic Town Meeting Company which incorporates computer conferencing into the Televote model, alongside television, radio, newspaper, telephone and face-to-face interaction.[10]

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[9] The televote model was experimented with in the City and County of Honolulu, the State of Hawaii, Southern California and New Zealand (Becker, 1981; Slaton, 1992). For further examples refer to Becker's report on teledemocracy projects at http://www.auburn.edu/tann/tann2/project4.html (last accessed 10/9/00). See Abramson et al. (1988), Arterton (1987), and Tehranian (1990:111-112) for further elaboration and critical commentary.

[10] For a description of the Electronic Town Meeting company, see http://www.auburn.edu/tann/tann2/project4.html (last accessed 10/9/00). Two other examples of teledemocracy projects using computer conferencing are United We Stand which employs an Internet Relay Chat consensus forming model (see previous URL) and Alaska's Legislative Teleconferencing Network (see Tehranian, 1990:118).

The rapid expansion of Internet access may mean that computer networking takes a more central role in future teledemocratic projects. Internet-based tele-conferencing and choice aggregation software has already been successfully tested in teledemocratic decision-making experiments.[11] 'The same intelligent agents that steer airplanes', Bullinga declares, 'can be built to steer government' (cited in Lehmann-Haupt, 1997).

Despite a strong emphasis on direct democracy, teledemocracy differs markedly from the ideals of the New Left. Rather than cooperative decision making through self-managed media, teledemocracy emphasizes the potential of new technologies for individual empowerment. Keskinen (1999) for instance, argues that individuals can

> gain more and more information on various social and democratic issues by having access to the ICT [information and communications technology]. . . . [L]arge segments of the population are now, and more so in the future, able to form *personal educated opinions* on common issues. . . . In modern societies, many people want to shift from being "the governed" into having "self government.". . . They want to have more power and control to *conduct their own life [sic] as they want.* The ubiquitous information networks and ICT of the future will be a readily available *tool by which people can easily empower themselves* . . . [my emphasis]

Teledemocracy, as defined here, draws directly upon liberal individualism.[12] Liberal individualism posits the individual as a rational, autonomous subject who knows and can express their own best interests. This subject is the basis for a diversity of liberal democratic theories.[13] Even moderate liberals like Rawls (1971:560) see the self as prior to its social roles and relationships and 'to the ends which are affirmed by it.' The liberal individualist

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[11] See Bullinga (1996) and Koen (1996).

[12] The form of teledemocracy described here is liberal individualist because it assumes that democratic politics consists of individuals pursuing their private interests. However, teledemocracy also links to a plebiscitary theory that draws on classic republicanism. Classic republicanism, Habermas (1996:184) explains, 'starts with the voluntaristic assumption that there exists a popular will expressing the current general interest and that, under the conditions of democratic self-determination, this will largely converges with the empirical popular will.' This republicanism is dormant in most forms of teledemocracy. Rather than an aggregation of wills to find the general interest of the people, various options are aggregated in utilitarian style to promote the strategic interests of atomistic subjects.

[13] Liberal individualism underpins the diverse positions of, amongst others, direct democrats (such as the teledemocrats), liberal pluralists (Dahl), egalitarian liberals (Rawls), elite democrats (Schumpeter), and libertarians (Nozick). Although these traditions may disagree on the problems facing democracy (state power, majoritarianizm, poverty, elites, etc) and may suggest divergent solutions (free market,

subject parallels the classic economic agent. It is, as Schumpeter (1942:269) argues, a self-seeking utility maximizer. In line with this liberal sense of self, 'citizenship becomes less a collective, political activity than an individual, economic activity – the right to pursue one's interests, without hindrance, in the marketplace' (Dietz, 1992:67). Democratic interaction – more often referred to as *free speech* – is encouraged in order to foster a vibrant "market place of ideas" (London, 1995:45). Political discourse provides optimum information for private individuals to make their strategic choices between competing positions.

Liberal individualist conceptions stand behind many seemingly divergent electronic democracy projects. This can be illustrated by comparing teledemocracy and liberal pluralist projects.[14] Liberal pluralist projects encourage negotiation and bargaining amongst interest groups through a representative system of government. Teledemocrats, on the other hand, aim for direct input into decision making by individuals. Despite these major differences, both teledemocracy and liberal pluralist projects draw upon a similar conception of political legitimacy. They accept a competitive political world in which democracy is ensured when the free expression (whether directly or through interest groups) of the interests of an atomistic subject is maximized. As such, they can both be classified as liberal individualist.

The liberal individualism behind teledemocracy may help explain why it has been so readily embraced by many mainstream and even conservative liberal individualists, persons who would normally be expected to reject models of direct democracy. Teledemocracy was widely popularized in the early 1980s by the information society theories of futurologist gurus such as Masuda (1981), Naisbett (1982), and Toffler (1981). It was subsequently taken up in the United States by technophile politicians including Ross Perot and Newt Gingrich. These politicians have run electronic town halls and utilized 'interactive satellite hook-ups, radio and television call-in programs, and live computer conferencing (Friedland, 1996:187; London, 1995:36). More recently, the Clinton Administration has applied teledemocracy models to the Internet, holding the first online 'presidential town hall

representation, division of powers, distributive justice, direct democracy, negative rights, etc), they all assume a similar liberal individualist notion of the subject. This subject is what communitarian critic Michael Sandel (1992) describes as the 'unencumbered self', a self-knowing subject individuated antecedently to its choice of ends. It is the form of political subject referred to in C. B. MacPherson's (1962) analysis of possessive individualism, Jane Mansbridge's (1993) discussion of self interest in 'adversary democracy', and Iris Marion Young's (1990) critique of the interest-based conception of democracy.

[14] For a comparison of the differences between the democratic positions underpinning teledemocracy and liberal pluralist projects, see Abramson et al. (1988:28-29).

meeting' in November 1999.[15] These politicians promote teledemocracy as a system in which representatives can go directly to the people without the 'distortion' of the media. Other advocates of teledemocracy, however, have protested that these uses undermine direct expression and put the technology in the service of elitist politics.[16] Such 'events' do indeed pervert classic teledemocracy. The participatory model is turned into a publicity stunt. We are left with electronically mediated political staging and selective interaction. Yet, behind all these 'distortions' lies the individualist ethos that enables the teledemocratic model to be adopted by, and adapted to, liberal representative politics.

The Internet has now become a central component in liberal individualist visions of electronic democracy. The Net offers the most powerful communications medium yet for maximising information flows and thereby the competition of interests. It enables the efficient promotion of political options and provides individuals with access to a huge amount of up-to-date information by which to make their choices. Furthermore, the Internet promises a means by which to register these choices. Software to enable Internet voting is already available.[17] Many advocacy organizations are rallying behind this consumer model, accumulating political information on Websites in order to help inform individual voters in local and national elections.[18]

Many local and national governments are playing their part in facilitating this liberal individualist model of cyber-democracy by depositing large amounts of public information online and by encouraging universal access to the Internet.[19] Wired cities and nations have been a particularly dramatic response to the demand to link individuals into the so-called information society. For instance, Wellington is attempting to build itself as an 'Info-City',

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[15] Selected questions from computer users were answered by the United State's President via Webcast. Bill Clinton compared this event to 'FDR's "Fireside Chats" and President Kennedy's live press conferences on television.' See http://www.excite.com/townhall/ (last accessed 1/7/00).

[16] This is what Becker's report on teledemocracy projects argues. See http://www.auburn.edu/tann/tann2/project4.html (last accessed 10/9/00).

[17] See, for example, Bullinga (1996) and Steeds (1998).

[18] Project Vote Smart (http://vote-smart.org),with Newt Gingrich on its Founding Board, declares its purpose with the slogan 'knowledge is the source of all power'. The Democracy Network (http://www. democracynet.org/) provides citizens throughout the US with election information including candidate position statements. The California Voter Foundation (http://www.calvoter.org/cvf/aboutcvf.html) sees itself as 'applying new technologies to provide the public with access to the information needed to participate in public life in a meaningful way.' A non-US example is Electronic Democracy – New Zealand (http://www.naturespace.co.nz/ed.edov.htm). This project aims to make public information more accessible to citizens through the Internet.

wiring public places, schools, and businesses (McDonald, 1997). Singapore is developing itself as an 'intelligent Island', attempting to link every household to the Internet (Wong, 1997). The US Government has had its own grand schemes, most notably its National Information Infrastructure initiative and Global Information Infrastructure vision. Amongst other things, these 'information highways' are seen as spreading liberal individualist democratic values across the globe (Gore, 1994). Yet many liberal individualists, particularly those whom I call cyber-libertarians, have opposed these initiatives because they threaten to allow state interference of cyberspace.[20] Moreover, it is argued that such state interventions are unnecessary, for the Internet is already a medium par excellence for the global spread of liberal individualism. George Keyworth (1997) of the libertarian Progress and Freedom Foundation (PFF) explains the difference between the 'superhighway' vision of liberal governments and the cyber-libertarian understanding of cyberspace:

> Superhighways tend to be government owned, operated by bureaucracies, and with limited access. Cyberspace, with the Internet as its initial manifestation, has a vast array of ownerships, is operated by empowered individuals, and with virtually unlimited access . . . . [C]yberspace is the culture and society of people who are individually empowered by digital connection.

This cyber-libertarianism, which largely hails from the United States, has been a powerful force promoting the liberal individualist conception of democratic cyberspace: 'life in cyberspace', Mitchell Kapor (1993) proclaims, is (or should be) 'founded on the primacy of individual liberty.' Rejecting government attempts to 'ward off the virus of liberty', John Perry Barlow (1996) declares cyberspace a place of undistorted expression where 'we are forming our own Social Contract' based on 'enlightened self-interest.' This equation of individual liberty and democracy through cyberspace can be seen in the charter of another libertarian 'public interest' advocacy organization, the American-based Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) of which Kapor is director. It champions individual rights and civil liberties as the basis of a healthy 'cyber-democracy.' The EFF, as Kapor and Weitzner (1993:299-300) explain, is an organization that intends 'to educate the public about the democratic potential of new computer and communications technologies.' It aims

[19] See Ostberg and Clift (1999) for examples of government online efforts.

[20] For a selection of electronic democracy rhetoric from influential cyber-libertarians, see Barlow (1996), Dyson et al. (1994), Gates (1995), Grossman (1995), Keyworth (1997), and Toffler and Toffler (1994). A celebratory look at many such figures is offered by Brockman (1997). For more critical analysis, see Barbrook and Cameron (1995) and Rowe (1996).

> to develop and implement public policies to maximise civil liberties and competitiveness in the electronic social environments being created by new computer and communications technologies. Our primary mission is to ensure that the new electronic highways . . . enhance First and Fourth Amendment rights and other laws that protect freedom of speech and limit the scope of searches and seizures, encourage new entrepreneurial activity, and are open and accessible to all segments of society.

Democracy is once more seen as complementary (and often conflated) with consumer capitalism. Cyber-democracy means that consumers are at liberty to freely move around cyberspace and make the choices they desire without the restrictions found in 'real' space, whether bodily, geographical, cultural, or political.[21]

Cyber-libertarianism, the 'purist' form of liberal individualism found in the electronic democracy rhetoric, has gained a strong following.[22] However, Internet-democracy projects based upon liberal individualism do not go unopposed. Increasingly, they are being challenged by electronic democracy visions inspired by communitarianism.

1.3.3 The Communitarian Camp

In the 1980s, particularly in North America, new 'technological possibilities' (particularly portable video and cable television) combined with the 'festering sentiments' of past radical democracy movements to stimulate community-oriented media projects (Tehranian, 1990:98-101). Rather than the broad social revolution aimed for by the New Left, these projects have generally been more interested in the use of new information and communications technologies to foster local community development in the face of rampant individualism, commercialization, and bureaucratization. Communitarian ideas have been particularly influential in this effort to revive community.

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[21] Cyber-libertarian rhetoric reasserts the Cartesian mind-body split. It tends to see cyberspace as a place of unsurpassed autonomy (and expression) for disembodied minds. For the Progress and Freedom Foundation cyberspace is central to the third wave knowledge age which has brought about 'the central event of the 20th century . . . the overthrow of matter' (Dyson et al., 1994). In cyberspace, as elsewhere in the knowledge age, 'the powers of the mind are everywhere ascendant over the brute force of things.' Barlow (1996) talks of cyberspace as 'the new home of Mind': 'it is not where bodies live.'

[22] The cyber-libertarian position is strongly supported by those who regularly frequent cyberspace. This support was demonstrated in 1996 when many WWW sites voluntarily 'blackened' their pages in a cyber-libertarian-led protest against threats of US Government censorship of the Internet.

Communitarianism argues that sustainable democracy must be based upon the shared values and conceptions of 'the good' that bind people into a community.[23] Unlike the unencumbered self of liberalism, the communitarian self is understood to be constituted within relationships structured by social roles and shared subjectivity. The community comes before and enables individual freedom, expression, and democracy. Democratic dialogue serves the common life of the group, rather than the interests of a private individual. It enables members of a community to discover their shared identity and purpose.[24]

New interactive media are celebrated as a means for fostering these communitarian ideals. As against the centralizing force of the mass media, 'small' (alternative) media offer the two way, decentralized communication necessary for building community (Tehranian, 1990:235-236).[25] Eschewing the techno-determinism of much cyber-libertarian rhetoric, communitarian electronic democrats emphasize that media structures need to be developed to support local, rather than commercial, government, or 'public' interests.[26] As Tehranian (1990:236) argues, for 'community media to serve community interests, we need to invent structures that put the ownership, management, and operation of the media in the hands of people themselves.'

These communitarian ideals have been particularly prominent within community access television initiatives in North America (Abramson et al., 1988:25).[27] Cable television has promised much. It can be locally owned and operated. It also allows participation by members of a community in their own programme making. By enabling individuals and groups to share their values, commitments, and visions, cable television provides the means for a community to discover, reinforce, and celebrate its common good. Yet cable has not

[23] Communitarian theorists tend to put forward a more sophisticated version than the crude communitarianism advocated in the popular literature and that has been used in my description here. Some of the central propositions of communitarianism can be found at The Communitarian Network, http://www.gwu.edu/~ccps/catel.html (last accessed 14/4/00). Prominent communitarian theorists include Etzioni (1993), Sandel (1982), and MacIntyre (1981).

[24] Communitarians see society as a substantively integrated ethical community. Solidarity is based upon a shared common good.

[25] These 'small media' include 'posters, small press, transistor radio, mimeograph machines, copying facilities, public phones, portaback video, audio and video cassette recorders, and personal computers' (Tehranian, 1990:235-236).

[26] 'Public' systems are seen as dominated by cultural elites with little community participation, let alone ownership and control (Tehranian, 1990:107-110).

[27] For examples of projects influenced by communitarian ideals, see Abramson et al. (1988) and Tehranian (1990).

realized communitarian ideals. Like New Left media projects, community access television has been undermined by pressures toward professionalization and commercialism (Tehranian, 1990:236).

Just as hopes for cable television began to fade, yet another technology arrived on the scene to reinvigorate communitarian-based electronic democracy. This new technology was computer networking. Computer networks promise to be the best medium yet for community building, given that they offer cheap, decentralized, two-way, communication. They began to be utilized by communitarian-oriented media activists in the 1980s. Basic bulletin boards or specially designed systems, as used by 'Free-Nets', were employed to create community computer networks.[28] The purpose of such a computer network is explained by the self-definition of the National Capital FreeNet in Ottawa:

> The National Capital FreeNet is a free, computer-based information sharing network. It links people and organizations of this region, provides useful information, and enables an open exchange of ideas with the world. Community involvement makes FreeNet an important and accessible meeting place, and prepares people for full participation in a rapidly changing communication environment. (cited in Navarro, 1997)

Community networks have increasingly turned to the Internet to construct this virtual meeting place (Kanfer, 1997).[29] The Internet is often cheaper to utilize and provides more advanced interactive conferencing tools than other computer networks. However, moving to the Internet may have major implications for community networking given that one's potential community is no longer confined to one's physical locality. With 'the advent of the Internet', Navarro (1997) speculates, we may be entering a new 'phase of Community Networking', one in which 'your local community can become global.'

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[28] Community networks are sometimes set up using basic bulletin board systems, but more often employ specially developed software. For instance, most so-called Free-Nets use FreePort software developed at Case Western Reserve University for the Cleveland Free-Net (Beamish, 1995). The term Free-Net is a service mark of the National Public Telecomputing Network (NPTN), an umbrella organization that helped sustain community member networks before it went bankrupt in September 1996 (Kanfer, 1997; Schuler, 1996:26).

[29] For instance, in Britain both the BBC (http://www.partnerships.org.uk/bol/) and Partnership Online (http://www.partnerships.org.uk/index.htm) offer online links to community networks and support for those wanting to build local community through the Internet (both consulted 1/7/00). Harrison and Stephen (1999) provide a useful survey of 50 American community networks linked via the Web.

Communities networked through the Internet add to a myriad of other groups that are already based in cyberspace, flourishing through e-mail lists, electronic bulletin boards, online chat groups, role playing domains, and on the Web.[30] Although geographically dispersed, participants of these virtual groups gain a strong sense of belonging (Navarro, 1997). They are bound together by shared problems, interests, ideologies, and values, rather than by geography (Bromberg, 1996; Turkle, 1996; Watson, 1997). As such, these groups are often referred to as 'virtual communities.' Most virtual communities, unlike community networks, do not explicitly attempt to build an offline, geographically-located community. Instead, virtual communities can be seen as providing a replacement for the degraded public spaces of modern urban life, enabling people to interact and form meaningful relationships online (Heim, 1991:73; Stone, 1991:11). Cyberspace is viewed as providing what Ray Oldenburg (1989) has called 'third places', the informal associational spaces between home and work that are essential to forming community (Hauben, 1997). Although the traditional 'third places' of communal life may have been eroded in modernity, there is the possibility, according to the likes of Rheingold (1993:25-26), that they can be developed through cyberspace.

> When the automobile-centric, suburban, fast-food, shopping mall way of life eliminated many of these "third places" from traditional towns and cities around the world, the social fabric of existing communities started shredding. . . . Perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall.

However, many communitarians have resisted the idea that virtual communities can stand in the place of geographically-located, face-to-face communities. Doheny-Farina (1996:72) doubts whether virtual groups can embody community. Virtual worlds, he argues, lack the necessary elements to be third places:

> a third place cannot exist separate from a locality because it exists only in comparison to its neighbourhoods, to local work, play, and family life, to the institutions and formal rituals that encompass daily life.

[30] Constructing one's Web 'home' within an online community has become very popular. Services offering free Web space often group 'electronic homesteaders' into communities of like-minded people. For instance, GeoCities groups people into different 'neighbourhoods' based on interests and lifestyle choices. People can interact by visiting each others' homes, sending e-mail, talking on chat groups, and posting messages to Web-boards. There are also community leaders in each neighbourhood to organize community activities. Another service, Fortune City, even has a City Hall and people patrolling the streets (Guardian Online, 1998).

So-called virtual communities, Doheny-Farina (1996:47-50) argues, lure us into a false sense of collectivity. They provide only an appearance of community because they are based on no more than shared interests. They do not involve the deeper bonds and values that are shared in the places one *physically* lives. Virtual communities actually individuate because '[t]hey encourage us to ignore, forget, or become blind to our sense of geographic place and community' (ibid: 14). Other communitarian-oriented commentators agree, warning of the hazards to our moral, psychological, and social welfare that may accompany the move from real, embodied community to de-materialized, geographically dispersed, and mediated, virtual association.[31] This does not mean, they argue, abandoning online interaction. Rather, such interaction must be aimed at fostering geographically-located relationships.

> If the prospect of telecommunity replacing spatially localized community ought to evoke skepticism or opposition, one can nevertheless remain open to the possibility of democratically managing the evolution of telecommunications systems in ways that instead supplement more traditional forms of democratic community. (Sclove, 1995:81)

Community or civic networks are seen as being able to manage cyberspace in order to enhance located community.

> Civic networking describes limited, focused, carefully applied efforts that attempt not to move us into cyberspace but to use communication technologies to help reintegrate people within their placed communities. (Doheny-Farina, 1996:xxiii)

According to Doheny-Farina (1996:54-55), the Internet

> can either enhance communities by enabling a new kind of local public space or it can undermine communities by pulling people away from local enclaves and toward global, virtual ones.

Virtual community enthusiasts disagree. They emphasize the reality of online community.[32]

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[31] See, for example, Sclove (1995:80), Slouka (1995), and Stoll (1995).

[32] The 'reality' of online community is supported by social researchers such as Bromberg (1996), Clark (1997), Turkle (1996), Watson (1997), and Wellman and Gulia (1999). Internet-based communities *are* different from physical, face-to-face ones. They are often more transient, and lack a depth of commitment (see Chapter Six). Moreover, so-called online communities are often 'communities of interest' that allow participants to pursue private ends. But to say that 'real'

Yet, they do tend to agree about the importance of an ongoing interplay between offline and online interactions. Virtual interactions are seen as complementary to face-to-face relations. Virtual communities can be both 'places people meet' and 'tools' for real world projects (Rheingold, 1993:56).[33]

This debate about how the Internet can facilitate 'real' community shows the increasing maturity of communitarian-oriented electronic democracy positions. Continuing to unite these positions is the belief that the Internet will only enhance democratic participation to the degree that it strengthens community by bringing people together to discover and build upon what they have in common. The working out of this belief can carry a radical element that, as I have already noted, has synergies with the New Left's media ideals. Communitarian-oriented rhetoric stresses the need for developing media structures that emphasize access, participation, and self-management (Burnett, 1996).[34] There is often an awareness of the embeddedness of cyberspace in global political economy, particularly the threat posed to online interaction by privatization and state control.[35] In line with the New Left ideals, these communitarian activists believe decentralized control of the media is fundamental to the idea of electronic democracy.

However, the communitarian emphasis upon a substantively integrated ethical community can also be rather socially conservative, defending traditional values associated with work, family, and community (Aronowitz, 1993:68). The idea of community connotes a 'mythic understanding of an essential "shared-ness" of a way of life before the fragmentation of

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communities cannot exist online overly restricts the notion of community. Sophisticated communitarians accept that different types of community can exist and may depend upon different forms of mediation and solidarity. For instance, Tehranian (1990:236) distinguishes communities of affinity, such as virtual communities, from communities of vicinity. Daniel Bell (1993:14) usefully distinguishes between three types of community: communities of place, or communities based upon geographical location; communities of memory, or groups of strangers who share a morally significant history; and psychological communities, or communities of face-to-face personal interactions governed by sentiments of trust, cooperation, and altruism. Virtual communities tend to fit within his idea of communities of memory.

[33] Rheingold's virtual community experiences through the Whole Earth eLectronic Link (WELL) are reiterated by Hafner (1997:111). 'The Well defied current notions about virtual community in that it wasn't one – entirely. In fact, the community probably wouldn't have thrived solely in virtual space. Problems that arose online got worked out offline, and vice versa.' WELL participants also came together for social events like picnics and even marriages.

[34] Communitarianism has been influential in radical media projects like Paper Tiger Television (see Schuler 1996:244-246).

[35] See, for instance, Rheingold (1993), Sclove (1995), and Schuler (1996). Schuler draws upon Bagdikian and Chomsky to analyse media control. Rheingold draws upon Habermas, Baudrillard, and Foucault. Sclove is well versed in critical theory.

interpersonal interaction and the loss of a taken-for-granted moral order brought about by the founding modern changes—secularization, urbanization, capitalism, industrialization and, of course, the emergence of the nation-state' (Stratton, 1997:266-267). This nostalgia for an organic society, or 'urge to see persons in unity with one another in a shared whole', can lead to a denial of difference (Young, 1990:229). Democracy here tends to become limited by the confinement of interaction to those who share essential features in common and who thus have the same 'identity.'

The logic of identity can be found in some communitarian-oriented electronic democracy rhetoric.[36] Rheingold (1993:25,10) associates the third places that he believes cyberspace can foster with traditional towns and cities. He goes so far as to call the virtual community to which he belongs a 'small town.' Robins (1996a:19-20) and Stratton (1997:267-69) argue that this rhetoric represents an America yearning for a mythical time before the shopping mall and centred upon the village pump, the town hall, and the local church. What is more, this escapism to the 'small town', as Stratton (1997:271) observes, involves a recoil not only from urban decline but from social (also read 'racial') diversity. Rheingold speaks of a 'shared consciousness' or 'groupmind' experienced in electronic community, images of 'maternal-familial containment. . . . unity, unanimity and mutualism. . . . enclosure and wholeness' (Robins, 1996a:20). Virtual community of this sort is largely at odds with today's multicultural, urbanized societies. Yet mixed in with this 'strong' communitarianism is a more progressive element that not only links back to the New Left's media project but also points towards a third vision of electronic democracy.

1.3.4 The Deliberative Camp

The idea of building third places online is often associated in electronic democracy literature not only with virtual community but also with the notion of a virtual public sphere.[37] This notion of a virtual public sphere points to the existence of a third electronic democracy camp that further develops the New Left vision of discursive spaces for citizen expression outside state and corporate control. This third camp is based on the idea of deliberative democracy. Benjamin Barber's (1984) call for the use of new information technology to foster 'strong democracy' is an early example of electronic democracy rhetoric inspired by deliberative

[36] I am dealing with Western discourses here, but communitarian ideals can be found globally. Tehranian (1990:211) explains how Third World communitarianism can be particularly conservative. Given 'the experiences of colonialism and neocolonialism', it often draws upon powerful longings 'to recapture the lost natural community and indigenous institutions.' The desire for community, Tehranian argues, often overshadows the principles of democracy.

[37] See Hauben (1997), Rheingold (1993), and Surman (1994).

ideals.[38] Barber rejects both the unitary politics of communitarianism and the 'weak democracy' of liberalism. Democracy should involve the transformation of private individuals into active citizens through the institution of 'strong democratic talk.' In a similar vein, Abramson, Arterton, and Orren (1988) argue for the development of a form of electronic democracy which draws on the best elements of communitarianism and liberal pluralism. They promote 'the democratic art of persuading or being persuaded in turn' and the idea that people should 'justify individual opinions in terms of the common good' (ibid:276). Moreover, they argue for the use of 'the congregating and conferencing capacity of the new media' to 'involve more citizens than ever in meetings and debates, discussion, and dialogue' (ibid:295).

An emphasis upon rational public deliberation has continued to be a prominent aspect in more recent electronic democracy rhetoric about the Internet (London, 1995; Street, 1997). The development of this deliberative strand of cyber-democracy will be further discussed below and then throughout this thesis. First, however, I want to develop the notion of deliberative democracy by contrasting it with both liberal individualism and communitarianism.[39]

Deliberative democracy conceives of political interaction very differently from liberal individualism. The latter's marketplace conception of politics sees the expression (and subsequent clash) of private interests as important for enabling individuals to arrive at 'informed' choices about the issues at hand. Deliberative democracy demands more of democratic interaction. In free and open dialogue participants put forward and challenge claims and arguments about common problems, not resting until satisfied that the best reasons have been given and fully defended. Participants attempt to come to an understanding of their interlocutors and to reflexively modify their pre-discursive positions in response to better arguments. In the process, private individuals become publicly-oriented citizens. Rather than relying upon the self-seeking utility maximizer of liberal

[38] Barber (1998a, 1998b) continues to provide persuasive arguments for his deliberative vision of democracy and the part for new technologies in this, although he has become increasingly pessimistic about the likelihood that these possibilities will be actualized. Community network enthusiasts, such as Schuler (1997) and Sclove (1995), are amongst those who have been drawn to Barber's idea of strong democracy.

[39] Some of the strongest formulations of deliberative democracy can be found in Bohman (1996), Chambers (1996), Cohen (1989), Dryzek (1990), Habermas (1996), Manin (1987), and Miller (1992). Recently a number of useful collections discussing deliberative democracy have appeared. One of the most interesting of these is Benhabib's (1996a) *Democracy and Difference.* See also Bohman and Rheg (1997) and Elster (1998). See Bohman (1998) for a survey of the developing deliberative position.

individualism, the deliberative model rests 'upon a person's capacity to be swayed by rational arguments and to lay aside particular interests and opinions in deference to overall fairness and the common interest of the collectivity' (Miller, 1992:56).

At the same time, the deliberative model can be distinguished from the communitarian conception. In the latter, dialogue is intended to help discover an already existing common good. In contrast, deliberative democracy sees dialogue as helping participants move towards understanding and agreement despite their differences. Deliberation, as Bohman (1996:8) asserts, is a 'public' rather than 'collective' activity. While communitarianism assumes a subject that is always already community focused, deliberative democracy posits a subject that becomes oriented towards a larger public purpose only through rational deliberation.

For both liberal individualism and communitarianism, democratic legitimacy is based upon the will of all, which is in turn derived from the expression of already formed wills, either pre-discursive interests or pre-given values. Both positions are rooted in notions of a self-determining subject, individual or collective (Habermas, 1996:103). In contrast, deliberative democracy relies upon *inter*subjectivity. All pre-discursive interests and values are up for grabs. A legitimate decision rests not upon the expression of pre-given wills but upon the deliberative process by which everyone's will is formed (Manin, 1987:351-352).

The public sphere is the institutional arena in which this rational deliberation and the making of public citizens takes place. It stands between the private individual and the state, allowing the ongoing critical scrutiny of official decision making. This conception of the public sphere does not exist in communitarianism and has quite a different role in the case of liberal individualism. For communitarianism, the public sphere cannot be differentiated from the substantively integrated ethical community. For liberal individualism, a separation of spheres is first and foremost demanded to protect private interests. The public sphere is simply an arena in which these private interests can be strategically pursued.[40]

[40] There are large variations between different liberal individualist conceptions of the public sphere. Liberal pluralism sees it as an arena for maintaining a vibrant marketplace of ideas. The concept takes on a purely strategic value in libertarianism. It becomes subsumed within parliamentary and party deliberations in elite theories of democracy. Direct democrats (such as teledemocrats) tend to ignore the public sphere altogether, arguing that individuals' pre-discursive interests should be expressed free from any intermediary institutions.

Deliberative democracy's public sphere relies upon a space for deliberation free from the impositions of private interests and state power. Communications media have increasingly become the central means of facilitating such a space in modern society (Habermas, 1989). The Internet, by enabling the decentralized interactions that constitute cyberspace, is seen by some as an exemplary media by which this communicative space may form.[41] The dialogue taking place through synchronous and asynchronous cyber-conferencing has even been compared to a revival of the Greek Agora, the New England town hall, and the eighteenth century Parisian café (see Clift, 1999a; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995:249). This vision of cyber-interactions facilitating the public sphere is being seriously pursued in some Internet-democracy projects.[42] For instance, Minnesota E-Democracy, an online initiative which will be looked at in detail towards the end of this thesis, has since 1994 helped foster an 'online interactive public sphere' to which people can go to rationally deliberate upon issues relating to Minnesota politics.[43]

Academic debate about whether the Internet can foster such a public sphere is beginning to develop. According to Internet researchers Michael Hauben and Rhonda Hauben (1997), the emergence of a deliberative sphere through cyberspace is clearly evident from the thousands of diverse conversations that can be found taking place online at any time. Douglas Kellner (1999) agrees, emphasising the expansion of the public sphere through the online communications of civil society. On the other hand, some commentators like Mark Poster (1997) strongly contest the idea that such a sphere can be facilitated through cyberspace. This debate promises to develop further given that both cyberspace and the deliberative model have been steadily gaining academic attention. As this happens, the deliberative position may become an increasingly prominent alternative to both liberal individualism and communitarianism in electronic democracy rhetoric and practice.

[41] Proponents of the idea that cyberspace may (given the right social conditions) offer a renewed public sphere include Aikens (1997), Barber (1998a, 1998b), Fernback (1997), Hauben and Hauben (1997), Kellner (1999), Moore (1999), Noveck (1999), and Wilhelm (2000).

[42] Many community network enthusiasts and virtual communitarians draw upon both communitarianism and deliberative conceptions of the public sphere. Examples include Clift (1999a), Doheny-Farina (1996), Rheingold (1993), Schuler (1996), Sclove (1995), and Surman (1995). For instance, while drawing upon images of the 'village square' and 'small town', Rheingold (1993) and Surman (1994, 1995) also see the Internet as enhancing the public sphere.

[43] See Minnesota E-Democracy's homepage at http://www.e-democracy.org/ (last accessed 17/8/00).

1.3.6 The Strength of the Deliberative Model

I have overviewed three electronic democracy camps which in various ways have picked up pieces of the New Left's vision for the role of the media and which can now be identified in Internet-democracy rhetoric and practice. A considerable amount of research (and promotion) is already being undertaken with regards to the liberal individualist camp. Governments, universities, and research institutes throughout the world are conducting pilot projects and looking at ways of enhancing liberal individualist democratic systems through the use of the Internet. Communitarian-oriented cyber-democracy is also being paid considerable attention. A substantial literature analysing community on and through the Internet is being produced by community network activists, communitarian critics of liberalism, and especially by social researchers who have found this to be a rich ethnographic field.[44] However, there is a lack of significant social analysis of the possibility of the Internet facilitating the deliberative model, despite the frequent claim that this model of democracy has an affinity with the communicative spaces developing through the Internet.[45]

I believe that this possibility deserves greater attention, not only given the apparent affinity between Internet communication and the discourse of the public sphere but also because of the democratic 'strength' of the deliberative model. The deliberative conception offers a normatively and sociologically superior democratic vision to either communitarianism or liberal individualism. Communitarian and liberal individualist conceptions posit unitary, pre-discursive subjects in which there is minimal room for difference. On the one hand, the communitarian ideal of a common ethical community values unity above difference. On the other hand, as Young (1990:229) points out, '[l]iberal individualism denies difference by positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by anything or anyone other than itself.' As such, both conceptions downplay the need for discourse and thus fail to provide an adequate democratic model for a pluralist society. In contrast, discourse is central to deliberative democracy because of the weight it accords to pre-discursive differences. In order to recognize and work through conflict-inducing differences, deliberative democracy

[44] There is an increasing body of social research on Internet-facilitated communities, collected in volumes such as Jones' (1998) *Cybersociety 2.0* and Smith and Kollock's (1999) *Communities in Cyberspace.* This research is not only being undertaken by those sympathetic with the communitarian vision (such as Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999) but also by social researchers putting into question the notion of virtual community (such as Robins, 1999).

[45] There has been much commentary and debate on the possibility of the Internet facilitating deliberative democracy by enhancing the public sphere. However, actual research into this prospect has been sketchy (see, for example, Roper, 1999 and Wilhelm, 1999, 2000). Attempts to develop in-depth research have largely been limited to graduate student thesis work. See, for instance, the dissertations by Abe (1998), Nien-Hsuan Fang (1995), Schneider (1997), and Thornton (1996).

insists that politics must be based upon public dialogue. Rather than relying on the expressions of unitary subjects, the democratic process is legitimated through an intersubjective process of reflexive and egalitarian reciprocity where private individuals are transformed into publicly-oriented citizens. As well as accounting for difference, rational deliberation 'assures some degree of practical rationality' (Benhabib, 1996b:71). More *reasonable* positions are developed as participants are obliged to reflexively put forward and then defend their positions in public deliberations.[46] In these ways, deliberative democracy offers a 'strong' and 'realistic' normative model for the politics of modern pluralist societies.[47]

The strength of the deliberative model justifies serious analysis of the possibility that communications online are constituting the informal spaces of public conversation – the public sphere – central to the model. In this thesis I carry out such an analysis. I investigate the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere, both in terms of what the Internet is doing and in terms of what it can do towards this end. In other words, I develop a *critical* research project, a project that not only aims to describe the world but that also seeks to make it a better place.

1.4 Thesis Procedure and Chapter Overview

In order to develop a critical analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere, I will draw upon Habermas' critical theory and surrounding debates. Habermas' work is extremely useful here because he has developed understandings of the public sphere and societal development that enable both sociological explanation and normative assessment of everyday practice. In the following chapter, I draw upon Habermas' theory of communicative rationality in order to develop a public sphere conception that can be used to evaluate online discourse. The normative requirements of this public sphere conception are

[46] Deliberation can thus improve the validity and rationality of decision making. According to its proponents, deliberation produces reasons for decisions that are not only more convincing but also epistemically superior to reasons that have not undergone the scrutiny of public testing in free and open dialogue (Bohman, 1996:25).

[47] Deliberative democracy has often been charged with being 'unrealistic.' However, deliberative democrats believe otherwise. Benhabib (1996b), Bohman (1996), Chambers (1996), Guttman and Thompson (1996), Habermas (1996, 1998b), Miller (1992), and Manin (1987) all defend the realistic nature of deliberative democracy in various ways. In particular, the deliberative model may be seen as more realistic than the liberal one which expects a person to have an ordered set of preferences, or communitarian democracy which claims an undifferentiated polis (Benhabib, 1996b). For an overview of some efforts to make deliberative democracy more realistic, see Bohman (1998).

identified, including the reasoned exchange of criticizable validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, inclusion, discursive equality, and autonomy from state and corporate power. The following chapter also shows how this normative conception is given sociological contextualization within Habermas' system-lifeworld theory of the development of cultural modernity and capitalism.

Habermas' theory of communicative rationality has come under extensive criticism, some of which puts into question the adequacy of his public sphere conception for my critical analysis of the Internet. In Chapter Three I explore the criticisms relevant to my research. I begin by looking at claims that a critical norm, such as the public sphere conception, simply cannot be developed without reference to discredited metaphysical foundations. Against such claims, I argue that Habermas' theory of communicative rationality points to a normative yet post-metaphysical status for the public sphere. I then consider two significant criticisms of the normative and empirical adequacy of the public sphere conception for my evaluative task. First, some critics argue that the conception excludes aesthetic-affective aspects of discourse, consequently limiting the resources available for reaching understanding and leading to discursive inequalities and exclusions. Second, there are those who argue that the 'modern' conception of the public sphere is 'outmoded' when considering postmodern, boundary-imploding phenomena like the Internet, phenomena that destabilize rational subjectivity and reality itself. With regard to the first charge, I provide a re-reading of the public sphere conception that shows that it does in fact make room for aesthetic-affective aspects of discourse. With regard to the second charge, I argue that although cyberspace does engender new relations, the postmodern 'effects' of the Internet are overdrawn and those effects that do exist are taken into account by the communicatively-defined public sphere conception.

Once defended, the public sphere conception can be utilized to critically evaluate the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. Chapter four sets out the methodological protocols of this evaluation. I begin by reviewing three general strands of media-technology research, each of which emphasizes a different determination: use, technology, and structure. I argue that each tradition offers a useful perspective but is inadequate if employed in isolation. What is needed for a comprehensive analysis of the Internet is a multiperspectival approach that takes each determination into account. I suggest that such an approach is offered by Habermas' system-lifeworld theory. Utilizing this theory has the advantage of situating the public sphere conception within the socio-political context. The system-lifeworld theory offers a critical framework within which the public sphere evaluation can be carried out. It provides both a methodological structure and helps point to

the possibility of and impediments to the realization of the public sphere through cyberspace under present social conditions.

The empirical evaluation begins in Chapter Five, where I focus upon the system level. Two requirements of the public sphere conception become particularly important at this level: the accessibility of deliberative fora and the autonomy of deliberations from state and corporate interests. Despite formal access, a lack of resources (of time, money, education, and so forth) inhibits many people from entering online discourse. In addition, the dominance of state and commercial interests over the Internet threatens the autonomy of cyber-communications. In particular, individualized, privatized interactions are dominating cyber-discourses. Despite such domination, however, semi-autonomous spaces of communicative action continue to exist within the Internet.

To determine the extent to which these semi-autonomous cyber-interactions may be enhancing the public sphere, I turn in Chapter Six to an analysis of online communicative rationality. Here, rather than autonomy and inclusion considered in Chapter Five, it is the more discursive requirements of the public sphere conception that become explicitly relevant: reasoned exchange of criticizable validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, and discursive equality. I evaluate public online communications in terms of each of these requirements by drawing upon relevant research and my own observations. My evaluation reveals tendencies within many online discursive spaces towards approximating the public sphere conception. However, I also identify a number of factors impeding the further development of the public sphere through the Internet.

In order to identify ways of overcoming the impediments to the Internet's ability to approximate the public sphere, I turn in Chapter Seven to a case study of projects that explicitly attempt to facilitate online deliberation. My central case is Minnesota E-Democracy, an ongoing deliberative initiative that attempts to foster an online 'public commons.' Revisiting the five requirements of the public sphere conception used in Chapter Six to evaluate more anarchic cyber-interactions, I show how Minnesota E-Democracy has been able to move online discourse further towards the deliberative ideal. However, two significant problems remain at the conclusion of this case analysis. First, how can online public opinion effectively influence formal decision making? Second, how can we increase the presently very limited representativeness of deliberative forums such as Minnesota E-Democracy?

I explore these two question in the latter part of Chapter Seven. In order to investigate how online public opinion may more effectively feed into government decision making, I undertake a case study of the United Kingdom Citizens Online Democracy project. My evaluation of this initiative shows that an over-emphasis upon the direct expression of interests promotes a liberal individualist model of politics. Public deliberation must be kept autonomous from legislative decision making in order to maximize freedom of expression. As such, it will often be hard to see the direct impact of cyber-deliberations upon legislation. However, online public opinion can indeed be effective. It can feed into government via the complex networks of the public sphere, including the mass media. The second problem – the lack of representation in online deliberations – is also explored at the end of Chapter Seven. By looking again to the Minnesota E-Democracy project, I identify various ways in which a greater number and diversity of individuals can be encouraged to participate, despite the lure of commercialized and privatized forms of interaction and the dominance of liberal individualist models in online political projects.

The fact that there are millions of people now using the Internet daily for interaction of various kinds but that only a small number take part in online deliberative spaces indicates that the limitations to deliberative democracy are not technological but political and cultural. Deliberative democracy requires the expansion of the deliberative political culture nascent within offline and online civil society. I hope that this thesis, by demonstrating the relevance and strength of the public sphere conception and by showing ways in which it can be enhanced through the Internet, will contribute to the extension of this culture. At the same time, this thesis is very much part of an ongoing discourse and a changing historical (including technological) situation. As Kellner (1997b) notes:

> the standpoint of critique and the normative criteria that differentiate emancipatory from oppressive constructions and uses of technology . . . themselves are historical, evolving, and subject to change and development. Conceptions of democracy, freedom, and human well-being are constantly shifting and so one's normative standards are historical, subject to the vicissitudes of history.

As well as the situatedness of its democratic ideals, the findings of this study are circumscribed by particular contexts, with first a United States and second a Western flavour, due to the domination of technological developments by these parts of the world. Despite these limitations, the sociological analysis of the Internet can point towards historical patterns that may provide a greater understanding about the role of communications technology in democratization. In this thesis I aim to combine such

explanatory logic with a normative critique. In other words, I aim to advance deliberative democracy by evaluating the possibilities offered by the Internet for enhancing the public sphere.

Chapter 2 Habermas and the Public Sphere: Developing a Critical Approach

2.1 Introduction

A wide variety of claims are being made about the Internet's potential to transform democracy. Some celebrate its ability to provide individuals with information and allow them to express their interests directly to government. Others see it as a way to reinforce communal spirit and values. Another group believes the Internet can facilitate deliberative democracy. I want to investigate this third vision of Internet-democracy because it promotes a strong democratic model that seems to have some affinity with online communication and yet, to date, has not been systematically researched. More specifically, I want to question the possibility of the Internet enhancing the central institutional correlate of the deliberative model: the public sphere.

This question has a normative as well as descriptive element. It sees the public sphere as a positive aspect of present society that social inquiry should not only evaluate but advance. This suggests, in a very general sense, a critical theory approach (compared with the claimed neutrality of positivist social science). Such an approach involves a theoretical orientation that not only seeks to understand the world but to change it – to provide a critique of our practices that points towards greater human freedom.[1] To be meaningful, this critique must remain socially grounded; critical theory finds the seeds of transformation within everyday life.

To undertake a critical analysis of the question of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere, I need a critical conception of the public sphere, one that is both normative and socially grounded. Where can I turn to find such a conception? The most systematic critical theory of the public sphere in terms of communications media and modernity is that

[1] The theoretical orientation I refer to as critical theory 'owes its origin to Kant, Hegel and Marx, its systematization to Horkheimer and his associates at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, and its development to successors, particularly to the group led by Jürgen Habermas, who have sustained it under various redefinitions to the present day' (Rasmussen, 1996:11). However, the general orientation I refer to is also influenced by theorists not normally associated with the Frankfurt school. As Calhoun (1995:34) notes, 'thinkers as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Donna Harraway, Dorothy Smith, and Charles Taylor are all contributors to the common project of critical theory.'

provided by Jürgen Habermas. In this chapter I will utilize Habermas' work to further develop a critical conception of the public sphere. I will begin by introducing Habermas' (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. While this work remains an important explanation of the development and subsequent decay of the bourgeois public sphere, I show that it fails to provide an adequate normative basis for the public sphere. I then outline Habermas' (1984, 1987a) *Theory of Communicative Action* in which he combines an analysis of everyday speech with a theory of social development (the system-lifeworld thesis) to illuminate stronger normative grounds for rational discourse and the public sphere within everyday social action. This enables me to develop a normative, socially grounded conception of the public sphere for my critical analysis. A summary of the essential elements of this public sphere conception, to be drawn upon throughout the rest of the thesis, concludes the chapter.

2.2 The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

2.2.1 Emergence of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

Habermas' publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (STPS) in 1962 (English translation 1989) marks the beginning of his long association with the concept of the public sphere. Since then his work has been at the forefront of the development of theories of the public sphere and deliberative democracy. In STPS Habermas used the liberal ideal of a public sphere of rational deliberation and opinion formation to evaluate the historical institutions of bourgeois society with which the ideal was originally associated. Although Habermas has now distanced himself from such an ideology critique approach, STPS remains an exemplary sociological analysis of (an instance of) the public sphere and provides the background to Habermas' later sociological theory and normative conception of reasoned public deliberation and opinion formation in modern society.

As a work of critical theory, STPS proceeds both empirically and normatively. At the empirical level, it offers an historical case study. Habermas (1989:xvii-xviii) stylizes an historically specific social formation of great complexity: the bourgeois public sphere developing out of that 'civil society' within Britain, France, and Germany from the European

high middle ages.[2] He emphasizes that although his stylization gives prominence to particular characteristics of the bourgeois social situation, the resulting public sphere conception is not a transhistorical analytical category. By this he means that it is not an ideal type abstracted from empirical reality that is used to analyse 'any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations' (Habermas, 1989:xvii). The bourgeois public sphere cannot be abstracted from its unique developmental history. But neither is STPS simply historiography since it is 'less bound to the specifics of historical material.' Instead, it attempts to provide a 'structural analysis of the interdependencies at the level of society as a whole', interpreting the bourgeois public sphere as an instance of 'a more general social development' (ibid, xvii). STPS can be further differentiated from the ideal type approach because it seeks to operate at a normative as well as empirical level of analysis. At the normative level, STPS proceeds via a classical Marxist ideology critique, confronting the historical manifestation of the bourgeois public sphere with the liberal ideals that it was proclaimed to represent (Habermas, 1992b:463).

Habermas contrasts the bourgeois public sphere with a premodern European form of publicity. He argues that in premodern Europe the public sphere as a unique realm distinct from a private sphere did not exist (Habermas, 1974:50). However, 'symbols of sovereignty, for instance the princely seal, were deemed "public"' (Habermas, 1974:50). This, Habermas argues, points to the existence of a public representation of power: representative publicity. The feudal rulers publicly displayed or represented themselves and their status *before* the people (instead of *for* them) 'as the embodiment of an ever present "higher" power' (Habermas, 1974:50-51). Representative publicity was thus theatrical, the people acting as backdrop for *staged* political performances (Habermas, 1992a:426). This presentation masked the actual secrecy of feudal power and decision making which was closed off from the gaze and participation of the populace (Peters, 1993:547).

Representative publicity, and the power of the feudal authorities, began to fade with the development of modern capitalist societies and the subsequent polarization of society into public and private spheres. With the Reformation, the church separated from the state and religious freedom supposedly came to ensure what was historically the first sphere of private autonomy. Other areas of privacy developed as the princely court and feudal estates each

[2] Civil society for Habermas is the institutional location which permits the development of the public sphere. Civil society is the 'sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication' (Cohen and Arato, 1992:ix).

split into public and private zones: areas of public authority (bureaucracy, military, parliament, law) were increasingly marked off from private society (production and household affairs). Notably, 'those occupied in the trades and professions, in so far as they had already established urban corporations and territorial organizations, developed into a sphere of bourgeois society which would stand apart from the state as a genuine area of private autonomy' (Habermas, 1974:51). The administrative power's interest in and attempt to control the 'basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor' was strongly challenged by the new bourgeois class of property owners (Habermas, 1989:27). This class of private individuals did not claim direct political power. Instead, they joined together as a public of fundamentally private individuals to deliberate upon issues of common concern and scrutinize administrative power. Their challenge to this power was effected by opposing the principle of secrecy, inherited by the modern state from feudal authority, with 'the principle of supervision' or publicity, a 'principle that demands that proceedings be made public (*Publizität*)' (Habermas, 1974:52). The 'public' became an actively deliberating body of (bourgeois) citizens rather than a passive audience. The new form of publicity, in contrast to representative publicity, opened the state's administrative decision making to the gaze of a critical public. This was enabled, amongst other things, by the development of a reading public, places of deliberation, and a political press.

Habermas (1992a:423), reflecting upon the German situation, explains the growth of a reading or *literary* public sphere that prepared the way for the political public sphere:[3]

> With the growth of a general reading public . . . [who] oriented their reading habits to an ongoing stream of new publications, there sprang from the midst of the private sphere a relatively dense network of public communication. The growing number of readers, increasing by leaps and bounds, was complemented by a considerable expansion in the production of books, journals, and papers, an increasing number of authors, publishers, and book sellers, the establishment of lending libraries, reading rooms, and especially reading societies as the social nodes of a literary culture revolving around novels.

The practice of literary criticism in turn stimulated a reflecting citizenry and was an important catalyst in the blossoming of political debate in the growing arenas of civil

[3] Habermas distinguishes the *politische Öffentlichkeit* or 'political public sphere' from the *literarische Öffentlichkeit* or 'literary public sphere' (McCarthy, 1989:xv). When referring to 'the public sphere' in this thesis I am speaking specifically of the political public sphere.

society: salons, coffee-houses, debating societies, and the lodges of free masonry. Such face-to-face deliberation was complemented by the development of a political press. Habermas (1989:181) argues that the press was the 'pre-eminent institution' in the development of the public sphere and democratic politics. The emergence of a political press not only provided a central mechanism for publicity but also created an arena where rational deliberation and the development of public opinion could occur. This critical public formed a source for a new mode of public authority. Public reason increasingly replaced arbitrary will as the means by which the state could be held accountable and its power justified. A political institution, the bourgeois public sphere, could be said to have developed: an (in principle) open sphere, autonomous from both administrative power and the private sphere of material reproduction, in which persuasive argument between politically equal individuals was standard practice.

2.2.2 Disintegration of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

Unfortunately, the bourgeois public sphere did not expand to the larger population. Neither did it last for long. From the mid-nineteenth century, Habermas argues, the bourgeois public sphere became subjected to a number of political and economic processes that lead to its structural erosion. Ironically it was the expansion of civil rights via appeal to liberal norms of inclusion that precipitated this erosion. With their increasing political rights, 'interest groups [especially the women's and labour movements] in civil society used the public sphere to demand "social rights" – the services or protection of the state' (Calhoun, 1992:22). Yet the growth of the modern welfare state lead to the increasing encroachment of the state upon public deliberation in the name of 'the collective interest.' This interlocking of state and society undermined the public sphere's autonomy and critical role. The identity of individuals in relation to the state was transformed from 'citizen' to 'client.' '[T]he new politics of state interventionism requires a depoliticization of the mass of the population. To the extent that practical questions are eliminated, the public realm also loses its political function' (Habermas, 1970:103-104). The public's critical scrutiny of politics was further weakened by the inclusion in the public sphere of the 'uneducated propertyless' masses: 'The public body lost not only its social exclusivity; it lost in addition the coherence created by bourgeois social institutions and a relatively high standard of education' (Habermas, 1974:54).

Changes in the mass media were equally significant. The growing centralization of ownership and control transformed the nineteenth century political press into a commercial enterprise aimed principally at increasing advertising revenues through the expansion of readership. These aims lead to the replacement of political material with entertainment. The

role of the press as a space for rational, autonomous deliberation and the formation of public opinion was undermined. The developing electronic media were absorbed into large commercial operations and an ever expanding state apparatus. State and commercial media, in the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, became part of the 'culture industry' – disseminating the dominant ideology through direct propaganda and a constant stream of stupefying 'low culture.' As such the media were central to the transformation of 'a culture debating to a culture consuming public' (Habermas, 1989:159). They aided the general withdrawal from the associational life of literary and political debate into privatized forms of consumption.

> When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode. (Habermas, 1989:161)

As a result of these social processes, public opinion and publicity have been transformed into hollowed-out versions of their former selves. The aggregation of individual preferences has replaced public reason as the basis of public opinion. At the same time, publicity has taken the form of public relations exercises aimed at legitimating state actions in the face of economic and social crises. With the need for 'at least plebiscitary support from the mass of the population', a *show* of publicity – 'a display of openness' – is required (Habermas, 1974:54). Representative publicity has been reinstituted through the mass media which enables political personalities and ideologies to be paraded before a mass audience:

> modern "publicity" indeed has affinity with feudal publicity . . . . The public sphere becomes the court *before* which public prestige can be displayed—rather than *in* which public critical debate is carried on. (Habermas, 1989:200-1)

The development of representative publicity is part of a refeudalization of social power:

> In the measure that it is shaped by public relations, the public sphere of civil society again takes on feudal features. The "suppliers" display a showy pomp before customers ready to follow. Publicity imitates the kind of aura proper to the personal prestige and supernatural authority once bestowed by the kind of publicity involved in representation. (ibid:195)

With the return of representative publicity, the functioning of the public sphere has shifted from rational critical debate to the competition for acclaim between powerful private interests.

> The process of the politically relevant exercise and equilibrium of power now takes place directly between the private bureaucracies, special-interest associations, parties, and public administration. The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute to its acclamation. (ibid:176)

The promises that the public sphere held for the development of public sovereignty has thus disintegrated within state capitalism and mass democracy. Individuals have been constituted as clients of the state and consumers within the capitalist market, rather than citizens deliberating and forming public opinion by which administrative power can be held accountable.

2.3 From Socio-Historical to Linguistic-Philosophical Basis for the Public Sphere

STPS is not just an historical description of the rise and fall of the public sphere. Habermas also offers an ideology critique of the bourgeois public sphere, showing how it failed to live up to the liberal ideals it celebrated, especially in regard to the central ideal of inclusion. The bourgeois public sphere, Habermas shows, was constituted upon the exclusionary structures of capital and patriarchy. Private property, as the determining factor of citizen status, excluded other groups from access to the public sphere and safeguarded the new found political power of the ascendant bourgeois (Dahlgren, 1987:25). The sphere was also based upon the exclusion of women who were bound to the productive tasks of the intimate sphere, providing the necessary support for the participation of the patriarchal head in public matters (Calhoun, 1992:10). Thus, despite claims of freedom from state and private interests, power and economic privilege did encroach on the public sphere.

However imperfect its realization, Habermas does not dismiss the public sphere as a democratic ideal relevant to the contemporary social and political formation. He sees the ideological and exclusionary bourgeois public sphere as simply part of the 'incompleteness' of the Enlightenment project. From this unsatisfactory historical actualization, Habermas' STPS attempts to recover a normative ideal of the public sphere that can critique the very situation from which it arose. However, the strategy in STPS is fundamentally flawed. First,

the historical narrative from which the norm is drawn is wanting. Habermas excessively idealizes the bourgeois public sphere, exaggerating the degree of reasoned discourse that occurred in the early stages of capitalist development while being overly dismissive of mediated communications under advanced capitalism (Calhoun, 1992:33; Curran, 1991:46; Dahlgren, 1991:5).[4] Second, Habermas fails to provide a convincing set of criteria by which to justify the derivation of a normative ideal from an ideology linked to an historically exclusionary situation (Postone, 1992:168). In other words, he does not adequately indicate how the elements of such an ideal are to be drawn from out of a particular ideology that is associated with everyday and necessarily limited practices.

Habermas (1992a:438) concedes to a degree of historical idealization in STPS: 'my analysis of a unilinear development from a politically active public to one withdrawn into a bad privacy, from a "culture-debating to a culture-consuming public," is too simplistic.'[5] Further, he admits that STPS is guilty of a 'collapsing of norm and description' (Habermas 1992b:463). He accepts that ideology critique places too much faith in historically contingent norms and value orientations manifested in specific institutions (Habermas, 1992a:442).

STPS offers useful insights into an historical instance of the public sphere, demonstrating the possibility of the public sphere under certain social conditions. Yet STPS fails to provide an adequate normative basis for a critical analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. It is in Habermas' work after STPS that he develops a more secure basis for a normative conception of the public sphere.

Given the methodological problems in STPS, Habermas re-approached the project of a critical theory of society via a different route. Rejecting the subject-centred dialectic of idea and reality, he developed and pursued a critical reconstructive approach that he calls

[4] The historical validity of various aspects of Habermas' account has been questioned and revised by a number of commentators including Ely (1992), Landes (1992), and Ryan (1992).

[5] This does not invalidate the general explanation of the development of modernity and capitalism that is put forward in STPS. As Habermas (1992a:430) indicates when referring to STPS, 'a mistake in the assessment of the significance of certain aspects does not falsify the larger outline of the process of transformation.' Habermas goes on to develop the general dynamic outlined in STPS in his system-lifeworld thesis.

'universal' or 'formal pragmatics.'[6] Rather than attempting to derive critical norms from specific historical moments, formal pragmatics tries to unearth the structures of action and understanding that are intuitively drawn upon in everyday communicative practices.[7] The method is *formal* in the Kantian sense of attempting to reconstruct the conditions of possibility of language use. This 'contrasts with *empirical* pragmatic research to the extent that the latter is concerned not with the reconstruction of general competencies but with the description and analysis of specific elements of language use. It is *pragmatic* to the extent that it focuses on the *use* of language, and hence, on speech acts or utterances, in contrast to semantics (which is concerned with the properties of isolated sentences)' (Cooke, 1994:3).

Habermas (1984:288) focuses his reconstruction upon communicative action because he believes it to be the original mode of language use upon which all other forms (including instrumental uses of language) are parasitic. He defines communicative action as being such that 'the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success [instrumental or strategic action] but through acts of reaching understanding' (Habermas, 1984:285-286).[8] Reconstruction of the pre-theoretical, implicit knowledge of communicative practice shows, according to Habermas (1984:17-23, 99, 307-309), that in *all* communicative acts implicit appeals are made to at least three types of universal validity claims, each referring to three validity dimensions. These appeals are to the truth of the propositional content with regards to the objective world, the rightness of the statement with regards to recognized values and norms, and the truthfulness of the expression with respect

[6] Habermas calls formal pragmatics a reconstructive science. 'For Kant and his successors, reconstruction took the form of a search for the transcendental ground of possible theoretical knowledge and moral conduct. Habermas maintains that in the meantime reconstruction, as a mode of reflection, has taken the form of a rational reconstruction of generative rules and cognitive schemata. Here he is thinking of endeavours such as Chomsky's generative grammar, Piaget's theory of cognitive development, and Kohlberg's account of moral development. According to Habermas these are examples of reconstructive sciences, because they set out to reconstruct, or make theoretically explicit, the pre-theoretical, implicit knowledge and competencies of acting and speaking subjects' (Cooke, 1994:1).

[7] Habermas (1984:288-337) reconstructs the universal aspects of speech with reference, in particular, to Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. The fact that Habermas looks for universals embedded in the structure of everyday language use indicates that he has not given up the idea of carrying out an immanent critique. Rather, as Calhoun (1992:40) indicates, he has transferred 'the immanence from specific historical conditions to universal characteristics of human communication.'

[8] Habermas' distinction between communicative action and other forms of action develops Weber's distinction between value rational action and purposive rational action. Habermas further divides purposive rationality into strategic and instrumental action. Both forms of action are motivated by egocentric calculations of success, but the former is oriented to influencing the intentions and actions of other persons while the latter is oriented towards the non-social world.

to the speaker's intentions, feelings, and aesthetic tastes.[9] For instance, the claim that 'abortion is murder' implicitly appeals to the claims that a foetus is a human being (truth), that abortion is wrong (rightness), and that the claimant honestly feels this way (truthfulness).

Communicative action generally takes a 'conventional form.' That is, participants rely upon a background consensus of taken-for-granted interpretations, everyday routines, and established norms, in order to reach understanding and agreement. However, this is not always the case as Habermas (1979:3-4) explains:

> As soon as this consensus is shaken, and the presupposition that certain validity claims are satisfied (or could be vindicated) is suspended, the task of mutual interpretation is to achieve a new definition of the situation which all participants can share. If their attempt fails, communicative action cannot be continued. One is then basically confronted with the alternative of switching to strategic action, breaking off communication altogether, or recommencing action oriented to reaching understanding at a different level, the level of argumentative speech (for purposes of discursively examining the problematic validity claims, which are now regarded as hypothetical).

Argumentation, also called communicative rationality, provides a 'court of appeal', allowing the reflective continuation, with different means, of action oriented to understanding in 'postconventional' situations – when all ultimate sources of validity can no longer be relied upon (Habermas, 1984:17-18, 25). More specifically, argumentation consists of the type of speech in which participants thematize *criticizable* validity claims and attempt to vindicate them through arguments (Habermas, 1984:18). In other words, a speaker makes a claim to validity that can be responded to by a 'yes' or a 'no.' Both the validity claim and response must be supported by reasons (ibid:25, 287).

[9] Habermas (1984:17-23) at times refers to five aspects of universal validity. As well as truth, rightness, and truthfulness, he also talks of the adequacy of standards of value relating to the evaluation of aesthetics and the comprehensibility or the well formedness of symbolic expressions. Habermas often combines or uses interchangeably claims to aesthetic adequacy and claims to truthfulness (referring to truthfulness-authenticity). The similarity is that, like truthfulness, aesthetic judgements can only be evaluated in terms of the authenticity of the speaker with reference to their subjective values and tastes. This can be referred to as the aesthetic-affective realm, in contradistinction from cognitive-instrumental and moral-practical forms of rationality.

Habermas differentiates argumentation into discourse and criticism, depending upon the particular validity claim that is *explicitly* thematized.[10] Discourse is such that the claim raised presupposes the strict aim of reaching agreement (Habermas, 1984:42). The disruption of cultural meaning and social solidarity that follows from unresolved questions of truth and rightness presupposes that any argumentation focused on such claims, which Habermas calls theoretical discourse and moral-practical discourse respectively, aims at consensus. On the other hand, argumentation oriented to the subjective world – therapeutic criticism expressing truthfulness and aesthetic criticism raising questions of authenticity – does not presuppose the aim of consensus.

Within modernity, the various 'forms of argumentation are institutionally differentiated, namely, theoretical discourse in the scientific enterprise, moral-practical discourse in the political public sphere and in the legal system, and aesthetic criticism in the artistic and literary enterprise' (Habermas, 1987a:352-353). I will be focusing on moral-practical discourse given that it is the form of argumentation explicit within the public sphere.[11] In other words, it is the form of argumentation systematically orientated towards the social environment, towards 'the totality of all normatively regulated interpersonal relations that count as legitimate in a given society' (Habermas, 1979:67).

This brings me back to the normative basis for the public sphere that I have been seeking in order to carry out my evaluation of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. My discussion has followed Habermas' move from the ideology critique of STPS to the reconstructive method of the theory of communicative action. I have shown how

[10] Although every speech act implicitly refers to all three areas of validity (truth, rightness, truthfulness), only one is explicitly thematized by the illocutionary component – the aspect of speech where the speaker performs an action in saying something, such as a promise, command, or confession (Habermas, 1984:289).

[11] Habermas (1992b:478-9) distinguishes his notion of discourse from that of Foucault. He agrees that Foucault's notion is useful in 'revealing hidden asymmetries and power structures' and admits that probably 'most discourses are of that kind.' Yet he also believes that 'there are several types of discourse that are self-corrective in terms of being sensitive to a critique of systematic exclusionary mechanisms built into them.' These discourses contain a 'self-correctiveness' which enables participants to identify and revise 'the rules of the game.' He gives examples of the self-correctiveness of certain institutionalized discourses: of the sensitizing impact of ethnomethodology within sociology and deconstruction within literature. Discourses that are self-corrective in this way, Habermas argues, are '[w]hat we call argumentation or rational discourse.' Habermas maintains that the public sphere is based upon such self-corrective discourse. 'The rights to unrestricted inclusion and equality built into the liberal public spheres prevent exclusion mechanisms of the Foucauldian type and ground a *potential for self-transformation*' (Habermas, 1996:374). To support this contention, Habermas (ibid) points to the labour movement and feminism, which were able to gain greater equality and inclusion in the bourgeois public sphere through appealing to its universalist discourse.

Habermas argues that communicative rationality is immanent within postconventional communication, and how, in the form of moral-practical discourse, it also coordinates action within the public sphere. As such, communicative rationality provides the basis for a normative conception of the public sphere. The details of this conception can be developed more with further reference to Habermas' theory of communicative action. By way of formal pragmatics, Habermas illuminates a set of presuppositions that every participant undertaking communicative rationality makes reference to. These presuppositions provide the requirements of the public sphere norm.

Before I develop these public sphere requirements, I want to outline Habermas' theory of modern societal rationalization, or his system-lifeworld theory, which links communicative rationality into an analysis of socio-cultural transformations, and, therefore, into the kind of analysis undertaken in STPS. This is important to my analysis because it provides the socio-historical context of communicative rationality (and thus of the normative public sphere), showing how it comes into existence and the limitations placed upon its practice.

2.4 Rationalization and Colonization of the Lifeworld

Habermas' theory of communicative action points to a normative basis for the public sphere within postconventional communicative practice. It also offers a theory of social rationalization, the system-lifeworld theory, that explains the differentiation of value spheres and the formation of communicative rationality. This explanation combines with formal pragmatics to show the grounding of the conception within everyday life. The system-lifeworld theory also explains some of the social and cultural factors inhibiting communicative rationality within contemporary capitalist society. The delineation of these factors is important because it points to some of the necessary conditions for the enhancement of the public sphere under present conditions.

Extending his sociological analysis in STPS, Habermas offers a compelling theory of social development that explains the evolution and subsequent retardation of communicative rationality and the public sphere. He argues that the differentiation of validity (into truth, rightness, truthfulness) and development of communicative rationality result from the rationalization and complexification of the social world in the movement from tradition to

modernity.[12] The subsequent restriction of communicative rationality also results from societal rationalization – in particular, from the one-sided or selective path that rationalization has taken with capitalism. Habermas develops this thesis by employing an analytical distinction between system and lifeworld processes of societal integration.

Through the system-lifeworld distinction, Habermas conceptualizes socio-historical rationalization as a dynamic within and between processes of cultural and material reproduction. The lifeworld (*lebenswelt*) refers to the realm of symbolic reproduction. It is the ever-present 'unproblematic background' of social life, the 'culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretative patterns' mediated by, and enabling, communicative action. It offers a 'conservative counterweight to the risk of disagreement that arises with every actual process of reaching an understanding' (Habermas, 1984:70). Habermas expands and complexifies the notion of lifeworld found elsewhere (such as in Husserl's and Gadamer's notions) by differentiating between three structural components of the lifeworld associated with distinct symbolic reproduction mechanisms: 'cultural reproduction', 'social integration', and 'socialization' (corresponding respectively to the spheres of culture, society, and personality). Each reproduction process is mediated by way of communicative action which enables the transmission and renewal of cultural meaning, establishment of solidarity, and the formation of personal identity (Habermas, 1987a:137-138). The system, on the other hand, refers to the macrosocial realm which operates beyond the conscious control of individuals. It produces and is reproduced through functional or strategic actions contributing to material reproduction.

Habermas conceives of the lifeworld and system as mutually dependent and inter-connected. But it is the lifeworld that is logically and historically prior: the internal logic of the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld gives rise to internal limits to the reproduction of society. The system develops out of the lifeworld. Social evolution, specifically modernization, develops through a progressive rationalization of the lifeworld on two levels. First, a differentiation of 'independent cultural spheres' takes place which sets free the 'rationality potential of communicative reason.' And second, a progressive decoupling of subsystems from lifeworld occurs with the enhanced importance of the system.

[12] Habermas, following Weber, sees rationalization as the process underlying the transformation of modern society from traditional society, where reason (rather than tradition) is applied to guiding actions in order to achieve certain ends. Unlike Weber, however, Habermas offers a more optimistic view of the outcome of rationalization, arguing that it has prepared the way for democracy.

The first process of lifeworld rationalization, the differentiation of cultural spheres, involves what is generally known as secularization, where critical reasoning breaks up the 'natural' unity of traditional world views and substantive knowledges. This rationalization 'signifies a breakdown of a "sociocentric" consciousness of a seamless magical-mythical world and the construction of a decentred consciousness which recognizes clear demarcations between the natural, social and subjective worlds' (White, 1988:95). With this decentring of consciousness, participants can take up the three different attitudes to the world: objectivating, norm-conformative, and expressive (with three modes of rationality: cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, aesthetic-expressive). Subsequently, separate 'specialized forms of argumentation' develop which are institutionalized into the differentiated cultural spheres of value: science and technology, law and morality, and art and literature (drawing upon Kant's distinctions and Weber's cultural rationalization thesis). These spheres of value are institutionalized as autonomous cultural practices regulated by their own principles (of truth, rightness, or authenticity-truthfulness), methods, and procedures. Experts utilize the criteria of validity specific to each domain to assess the worth of cultural products that are put forward. Postconventional discourses develop where the validity of all previously held understandings of life become subject to, and legitimated via, an ongoing process of criticism and revision through rational argumentation rather than via taken-for-granted assumptions. Thus, cultural rationalization leads to the development of communicative rationality. Most significantly, in terms of this thesis, the formation of communicative rationality enables a public sphere of moral-practical discourse to develop separate from the intimate sphere of conventional communicative action.

Value differentiation precipitates a second level of differentiation, the 'decoupling of system and lifeworld.' In pre-modern societies, the functions of material reproduction in the lifeworld take effect through institutions linked to social integration. These include, 'status differentiations based on sex, generation, and ancestry; the circulation of goods via marriage relations; the reciprocity of services built into the normative requirements of social roles; and the ritual exchange of valuable objects' (McCarthy, 1984:xxix). With the decentring of modern consciousness, the separation of the objective world from social and subjective worlds allows contexts of instrumental or strategic action to be separated from those of communicative action. Material reproduction is able to be performed independent from symbolic reproduction. This allows the state and the economy (regulated by the 'delinguistified steering media' of administrative power and money respectively) to gain increasing independence from the normative structures of the lifeworld until they assume the

form of quasi-autonomous subsystems of purposive rational action.[13] However, the system remains interconnected with the lifeworld. '[T]he economic and the administrative systems of action have to be anchored in the lifeworld by way of institutionalization of the money and power media' (Habermas, 1982:280). In particular, the development of law and morality enables the institutionalization of the media of system integration, notably the institutionalization of money in property and contract law and the institutionalization of administrative power in constitutional law.

My discussion has led to the point where, for conceptual and analytical clarification, we can situate the central activities of the public sphere, intimate sphere, state, and economy within the system-lifeworld and public-private domains. This is illustrated in Figure 2.1 below. Although the figure over-simplifies the actual situation, it emphasizes the public sphere's mediating position between the intimate sphere and the state, as well as its autonomy from the economy.[14]

Figure 2.1 System-Lifeworld and Public-Private Domains

	System	**Lifeworld**
Public	State	Public Sphere
Private	Economy	Intimate Sphere

[13] The media of money and administrative power are 'delinguistified' in that they are alienated from the agents and the natural languages of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1992b:473). In other words, they are based upon strategic and instrumental rationality rather than communicative rationality.

[14] The location of the state and economy within the system indicates that their activities are dominated by strategic and instrumental rationality. This is not to say that communicative rationality has no place in the affairs of state and economy. Communicative rationality is required for the effective functioning of the formal publics of democratic government (both executive and legislative branches) and for democratic relationships to develop within the workplace.

The process of rationalization that has led to the differentiation of the spheres of rationality has had significant implications for post-traditional social integration. Value differentiation creates increasing difficulties for meeting the need for social coordination because it disrupts the taken-for-granted background assumptions that secure agreement.

> The more the worldview that furnishes the cultural stock of knowledge is decentred, the less the need for understanding is covered *in advance* by an interpreted lifeworld immune from critique, and the more this need has to be met by the interpretive accomplishments of the participants themselves, that is, by way of risky (because rationally motivated) agreement (Habermas, 1984:70).

However, the steering media of money and administrative power that come to the fore with system-lifeworld decoupling increasingly relieve the risk of dissensus and instability. In spheres that can be organized through purposive rational action, these media are able to replace communicative rationality as the coordinating mechanism of social relations with the impersonal operations of instrumental and strategic reason. These delinguistified media 'connect up interactions in space and time into more and more complex networks that no one has to comprehend or be responsible for' (Habermas, 1987a:184).

The two level rationalization of the lifeworld, cultural differentiation followed by system uncoupling, can be seen, in principle, as progressive. Cultural rationalization replaces the unquestioned authority of time-honoured tradition with self-conscious and formal structures of reason, providing the basis for democratic rule through moral-practical discourse in the public sphere. At the same time, instrumentally regulated subsystems of state and economy enhance society's ability to meet its needs of material reproduction and alleviate the burden of communicative sociation on postconventional actors by substituting purposive rational action for communicative action in certain spheres. However, the particular path that capitalist modernization has taken in Western societies has led to pathological consequences.

To explain the one-sided rationalization that he believes to have unfolded, Habermas expands the Marxist analysis of class-based conflict in state capitalism, adding the role of administrative power in the development of Western capitalist society. Habermas argues, along similar lines to STPS, that both the state and the market have increasingly intervened in the lifeworld in order to pacify capitalist stimulated class conflicts and crises tendencies through a series of rewards and compensations (Cooke, 1994:137). This has lead to what Habermas refers to as the 'colonization of the lifeworld.' The state and economy have reacted

> back upon the rationalized life forms of modern society that made them possible, to the extent that processes of monetarization and bureaucratization penetrate the core domains of cultural production, social integration and socialization. (Habermas, 1987b:355)

> . . . systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas the mediatization of the lifeworld assumes the form of a colonization. (Habermas, 1987a:196)

This colonization leads to a 'one-sided rationalization' or 'reification' of the lifeworld. Everyday life is progressively brought under autonomous system imperatives resulting in an increasingly intensive administration of public life and the commodification of private life.

> The communicative practice of everyday life is one-sidedly rationalized into a utilitarian life-style; this media-induced shift to purposive-rational action orientations calls forth the reaction of a hedonism freed from the pressures of rationality. As the private sphere is undermined and eroded by the economic system, so too is the public sphere by the administrative system. The bureaucratic disempowering and desiccation of spontaneous processes of opinion- and will-formation expands the scope for engineering mass loyalty and makes it easier to uncouple political decision-making from concrete, identity-forming contexts of life. (Habermas, 1987a:325)

The expansion of bureaucratic power (particularly in the form of the welfare state) and the market has enabled state-capitalist societies to relatively successfully defuse class conflict in the sphere of production and neutralize the public sphere as a site of effective citizen participation. *Citizen-employees* are compensated for this loss of political and economic power through the distribution of economically produced values. As such, they assume the status of *clients* of the state and *consumers* in relation to the market (White, 1988:112).[15] Decision making is removed from public focus, taken care of by purposive rational

[15] The expansion of a 'net of client relations' over core areas of the lifeworld not only supports the analysis of STPS (depoliticization of public sphere) but parallels Foucault's idea of the increasingly 'carceral' society (White, 1988:113). Foucault's work in the area of the disciplinary regimes of modern society will be drawn upon briefly in my exploration of the relationship between the state and cyberspace in Chapter Five.

economic and administrative functionaries. While this spread of purposive rational action into areas of communicative sociation staves off systemic crises, it also leads to pathologies that 'manifest themselves in the respective domains of culture, society and person as loss of meaning, anomie or mental illness' (Habermas, 1982:279).

Systemic domination is supported by concomitant developments at the level of cultural consciousness. Habermas (1987a:353-355), in a discussion of Daniel Bell's 'end of ideology' thesis, argues that within a rationalized (that is, postconventional) lifeworld ideology, loses its power to convince. Under these conditions, as Habermas (ibid:355) indicates, one could expect lifeworld reification to come to consciousness. However, cultural enlightenment has turned into 'cultural impoverishment' as the specialized cultural spheres of science, law, and aesthetic criticism have become increasingly insulated from everyday life, understood only by elites working within them. As knowledge becomes increasingly specialized, the development of a critical consciousness becomes more and more difficult for the average citizen. '*Everyday consciousness* is robbed of its power to synthesize; it becomes *fragmented*' (ibid). This 'fragmentation of consciousness' combines with the reification of social processes to undermine a critical understanding of the systemic domination of everyday life.[16]

> In place of "false consciousness" we today have a "fragmented consciousness" that blocks enlightenment by the mechanism of reification. It is only with this that the conditions for a *colonization of the lifeworld* are met. When stripped of their ideological veils, the imperatives of autonomous subsystems make their way into the lifeworld from the outside—like colonial masters coming into a tribal society—and force a process of assimilation upon it. The diffused perspectives of the local culture cannot be sufficiently coordinated to permit the play of the metropolis and the world market to be grasped from the periphery. (ibid:355)

Despite lifeworld colonization and fragmentation, there remains a rational potential within modern society and culture that has yet to be fully realized. The selective pattern of rationalization that has unfolded must be distinguished from the differentiation of rationality within modernity.

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[16] Despite differentiating fragmentation from false consciousness, Habermas' notion of ideology as the hiddenness of reification through fragmentation of consciousness – normative positions being cloaked in the mantle of scientific authority and objectivity – is not all too distant from the notion of ideology as mystification or false consciousness. See Chambers (1996:207-208) for a comparison of Habermas' notion of rational discourse and various understandings of distorted or false consciousness.

> It is not the differentiation and independent development of cultural value spheres that lead to the cultural impoverishment of everyday communicative practice, but the elitist splitting-off of expert cultures from contexts of communicative action in daily life. It is not the uncoupling of media-steered subsystems and of their organizational forms from the lifeworld that leads to the one-sided rationalization or reification of everyday communicative practice, but only the penetration of forms of economic and administrative rationality into areas of action . . . dependent on mutual understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action. (Habermas, 1987a:330-331)

This thesis, of the rational potential within modernity versus the actuality of one-sided rationalization, is central to the 'critical' status of Habermas' theory of communicative action, pointing to a concrete radical-democratic politics.

> The point is to protect areas of life that are functionally dependent on social integration through aims, norms and consensus formation, to preserve them from falling prey to the systemic imperatives of economic and administrative subsystems growing with dynamics of their own, and to defend them from becoming converted over, through the steering medium of the law, to a principle of sociation that is, for them, dysfunctional. (Habermas, 1987a:372-373)

The aim, according to Habermas (1992a:444), must be to achieve 'a new balance between the forces of societal integration', to put the system's media of money and administrative power in their proper place so that 'the practically oriented demands of the lifeworld' can prevail. This means to at least 'erect a democratic dam against the colonizing encroachment of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld.' An autonomous public sphere of moral-practical action can provide such a dam. In fact, the public sphere of moral discourse offers not only the means by which the lifeworld can hold the system at bay but the way in which the lifeworld can react back upon the system – to democratically influence and make accountable economic and administrative power.[17] The public sphere can also help overcome the fragmentation of consciousness by linking expert cultures into everyday contexts of communicative action.

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[17] The uncoupling of the spheres of system and lifeworld integration does not infer a 'linear dependency in one direction or the other. Both are conceivable.' The institutions, centrally the law, that anchor the economic and administrative subsystems in the lifeworld can act as mediums for either the influence of the lifeworld on the system, or vice versa (Habermas, 1987a:185).

Habermas (1987a:391-393) sees hope for maintaining and opening up rational democratic spaces in the action of the 'new social movements' – ecologysm, peace activism, feminism, local autonomism, and so forth. They offer resistance against both the colonization of the lifeworld and cultural impoverishment. Unlike revolutionary groups focused on economic and political issues of material reproduction and redistribution, the new social movements tend to be focused upon securing autonomous space within the lifeworld for the articulation of identities, upon 'defending and restoring endangered ways of life' (ibid). Such action, particularly when focused upon the universal inclusion of all minorities and marginal groups, defends and reproduces communicative action and deliberative publics (Habermas, 1996:376).

As well as autonomous public spheres, Habermas (1989:209) suggests in STPS the possibility of the democratization of intra-party and intra-associational publics (interest associations and parties), because of their potential as 'centers of a public communication still capable of being regenerated.' He later rejects this possibility because he believes such political sub-systems are unable to be transformed democratically from within, without damage to their ability to function (Habermas, 1992a:444). In his most recent writings he maintains the need for a separation of the political public sphere from state administration (Habermas, 1996:372). Yet Habermas also points to the necessity of deliberative decision-making processes, of parliaments and the legal system, to complement the informal public sphere. These formal decision-making bodies are important to deliberative democracy, as will be further emphasized below, but they are not the focus of this thesis. Rather, I want to stay focused upon the public sphere of private individuals meeting to deliberate as a public. It is this space of moral-practical discourse that must above all else, in Habermas' view, be maintained to secure hope for a more democratic society.

The Internet offers one possibility of extending moral-practical discourse in contemporary society. This brings me back to my research question: how can the Internet enhance the public sphere? This question can be read with respect to the immediate discussion regarding lifeworld colonization as: how can cyber-publics resist lifeworld colonization and develop their full communicative potential? In attempting to answer this question, my research takes seriously the theory of communicative action 'as a framework within which interdisciplinary research on the selective pattern of capitalist modernization can be taken up once again' (Habermas, 1987a:397). The system-lifeworld conception that I have outlined in this section is pivotal to this framework, providing a sociological contextualization that not only explains the development of the normative basis of the public sphere but also helps to identify the possibility, under present socio-cultural conditions, of its realization through the Internet. As

such, this contexualization provides an invaluable resource for my critical analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. In order to carry out this analysis, the public sphere conception must be clearly defined, which is the task of the next section.

2.5 Delineating the Public Sphere of Moral-Practical Discourse

The critical analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere requires a comparison between online practices and a normative conception of the public sphere. For this purpose, I will now develop such a conception, drawing mostly upon Habermas' theory of communicative action. In the process of defining this public sphere conception, I will deal with a number of critiques that are largely aimed at STPS and accounted for by Habermas' subsequent linguistic turn. Critiques targeting the conception's rationality claims will be addressed in Chapter Three.

STPS delineates four concepts central to the public sphere: public, publicity, rational deliberation, and public opinion. The public is, of course, fundamental to the public sphere: '[t]here can be no public sphere without a public' (Habermas, 1996:364). Publicity is equally important. It represents the freedom to speak, and the transparency (visibility) and disclosure of political power and information. These two concepts, public and publicity, stem directly from *Öffentlichkeit,* the German term translated in STPS as public sphere.[18]

However, as we move away from subject-centred rationality and towards the theory of communicative action, these two concepts (public and publicity) play a less prominent role in defining the public sphere. It is the second two concepts, rational deliberation and public opinion, that become more useful in helping define the public sphere in terms of moral-practical discourse. *Rational discourse* (communicative rationality or argumentation) constitutes a space for communication that enables the formation of *public opinion* by which government decisions are legitimated. In this section I will define the public sphere through these two concepts. I will firstly introduce the communicative character of the public sphere. I will then develop the requirements of the normative public sphere conception suggested by Habermas' reconstruction of rational discourse. Finally, I will consider the process of public opinion formation.

[18] *Öffentlichkeit* 'literally means "publicity" in the sense of publicness . . . . [b]ut, as a concrete noun, [it] also means *the* public. Thus its use in German bears a more concrete connotation than the former and a more abstract one than the latter', hence it is translated as 'public sphere' (Shapiro, 1970:viii).

2.5.1 Defining the Public Sphere through Communicative Rationality

The public sphere is an 'intersubjectively shared space' reproduced through communicative action (Habermas, 1996:360-361).[19] 'A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body' (Habermas, 1974:49). The 'spacial structure' of 'simple interactions' expands and is 'rendered more permanent' as more conversations are added into the 'network' of 'information and points of view.' This network of communicative action is not 'an institution', an 'organization', a 'system', nor 'a framework of norms.' Rather, it is a 'social phenomenon' whose character can be described via 'architectural metaphors of structured space': 'forums, stages, arenas, and the like.' The phenomenon takes on an ever more abstract and generalized quality as communications detach themselves from the public's physical presence and are embedded in the 'virtual' interactions of an unlimited public of strangers (Habermas, 1996:360-361).

The constitution of the public sphere by communicative action is what separates it from other arenas (administrative power and the commodity market) in which purposive rational (instrumental and strategic) action is the main mode of coordination. The mode of communication in the public sphere is also what differentiates it from the sphere of intimate relationships. Although participants in the sphere of intimate privacy do utilize communicative action, they often do so in a conventional sense, drawing upon taken for granted traditions and cultural values as resources for reaching understanding. The public sphere emerges from out of the intimate sphere when the specific form of postconventional communicative action known as rational argumentation, or communicative rationality, is called upon to solve a moral-practical validity dispute that puts into question the pre-existing normative consensus. As Habermas (1996:366) explains,

> The threshold separating the private [intimate] sphere from the public is not marked by a fixed set of issues or relationships but by *different conditions of communication*. Certainly these conditions lead to differences in the accessibility of the two spheres, safeguarding the intimacy of the one sphere and the publicity of the other. However, they do not seal off the private from the public but only channel the flow of topics from the one sphere into the other. For the public sphere draws its impulses from the private handling of social problems that resonate in life histories.

[19] 'Public space' is one possible translation of *Öffentlichkeit* (Robbins, 1993:xvi).

The content or agenda of argumentation in the public sphere arises from disputes that have developed in the intimate sphere. As argumentation proceeds, it soon becomes obvious which disputes can be dealt with through the deliberation of private individuals forming a rational public: issues involving moral-practical validity claims that can be resolved through political discourse.[20] Cognitive-instrumental questions (requiring scientific-theoretic discourse) and aesthetic-affective questions (requiring aesthetic and therapeutic critique) fall out of consideration in the process of deliberation. But no problems are a priori excluded from discussion. This avoids the common criticism of Habermas' public sphere notion that certain issues are excluded from public debate because they are deemed private and thus non-political.[21] The fact that the agenda for critical debate is determined within rational deliberation parallels Fraser's (1992:215) vision of the public sphere where what will 'count as a matter of common concern will be decided precisely through discursive contestation. . . . [so] that no topics should be ruled off limits in advance of such contestation.'[22]

Another criticism often directed at Habermas' public sphere conception, particularly as formulated in STPS, is that it offers little room for multiple publics. The reference to 'the' public sphere in the singular is seen as neglecting the empirical fact of the plurality of groups and publics in contemporary society (Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 1992; Young, 1990). Revisionist historiography has shown that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a number of public spheres were operating and competing along side the bourgeois public, including women's and proletarian publics (Eley, 1992; Negt, 1993; Ryan, 1992). In STPS Habermas says little about such 'alternative, "plebeian", popular, informal or oppositional public spheres' (Dahlgren, 1991:6). These public spheres often consist of 'subaltern counterpublics, where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1992:210). The public sphere as a democratic ideal, according to Fraser (1992:209), must accommodate this multiplicity of publics,

[20] The term 'political' here refers to disputation that draws upon communicative rationality.

[21] Some of the more complex critiques of the public/private dichotomy can be found in Benhabib (1992:108-109), Fraser (1992, 1997), Philips (1997), and Young (1990:119-120). All these (feminist) theorists agree to retain a public/private distinction in some form. As Philips (1997:149) asserts, 'we might want to say that everything is political, but this does not commit us to the view that there is no difference between private and public life.' The problem for all these theorists is where to draw the line between public and private and who should have the power to do the drawing. See in particular, Benhabib (1992:18), Fraser (1997), and Young (1990:119-120).

[22] A similar formulation is offered by Benhabib (1992).

including those spaces that allow subordinate groups to express views, form opinions, and develop identities outside dominant arenas. Fraser (1997:118) argues that

> an adequate theory of the public sphere would need to theorize both the multiplicity of public spheres in contemporary late-capitalist societies and also the relations among them. It would need to distinguish, for example, official governmental public spheres, mass mediated mainstream public spheres, counterpublic spheres, and informal public spheres in everyday life.

Habermas (1992a:425) has come to accept this conception, arguing that

> [i]t is wrong to speak of one single public . . . . Apart from introducing a greater internal differentiation of the bourgeois public, which by means of a more detail-oriented focus could also be accommodated within my model, a different picture emerges if *from the very beginning* one admits the coexistence of competing public spheres and takes account of the dynamics of these processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere.

Habermas (1992a:440) now regards the public sphere as a complex network of publics – a 'polycentric public sphere.' He talks of a substantive differentiation of the public sphere that includes 'popular science and literary publics, religious and artistic publics, feminist and "alternative" publics, publics concerned with health-issues, social welfare, or environmental policy' (Habermas, 1996:373-374). This heterogeneous notion is accommodated by the communicatively defined conception of the public sphere. As Benhabib (1992:105) explains,

> The public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in practical discourse, evaluating their validity. In effect, there are as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms. Democratization in contemporary societies can be viewed as the increase and growth of autonomous public spheres among participants.

Moreover, Habermas (1996:374) sees the public sphere as

> differentiated into levels according to the density of communication, organizational complexity, and range—from the *episodic* publics found in taverns, coffee houses,

> or on the streets; through the *occasional* or "arranged publics of particular presentations and events, such as theatre performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the *abstract* public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even across the globe, and brought together only through the mass media.

The public sphere, Habermas (1996:373) argues, 'represents a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arenas.' There are no limits on geographical size, as STPS may lead critics to believe. A public sphere does not need to be envisaged as linked to a nation-state, it can be theorized at the local and global levels. The only guide to the size of a public is that all those potentially affected by a particular issue raised for deliberation must be included (Habermas, 1996:365).

But the idea of multiple publics at varying levels raises the problem of fragmentation. How are the multiple publics to be coordinated? Habermas (1996:374) argues that, 'despite the manifold differentiations',

> 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 radially 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. . . . [B]oundaries inside the universal public sphere remain permeable in principle.

Such claims indicate the necessity of theorizing and promoting the notion of a central public sphere.[23] 'All partial public spheres point to a comprehensive public sphere in which society as a whole fashions a knowledge of itself' (Habermas, 1987b:360). This idea of some sort of core public into which overlapping publics at various levels feed is proposed by other media theorists such as Curran (1991) and Garnham (1992:311). Fraser (1992:212), although insistent upon the need to account for multiple publics, also emphasizes the necessity of a conception of a 'comprehensive arena in which members of different, more limited publics talk across lines of cultural diversity.' Calhoun (1992:37) develops this point usefully by extending the communicative conception of the public sphere. He argues that in order to

[23] This conception of an overarching public must be distinguished from the idea of formal decision-making bodies into which the public sphere feeds.

describe the communicative relationships amongst different publics it might be productive 'to think of the public sphere as involving a field of discursive connections. Within this network there might be a more or less even flow of communication. In nearly any imaginable case there will be clusters of relatively greater density of communication within the looser overall field.' The public sphere can be referred to as the overarching conception that accommodates the various clusters of publics which are constituted by communicative rationality.

In this discussion I have described the general character of the public sphere, showing how it consists of a complex network of overlapping publics constituted through communicative rationality. This normative conception of the public sphere needs to be delineated further before we can carry out a critical analysis of the Internet. Such a delineation can be developed from Habermas' reconstruction of the presuppositions of communicative rationality.

2.5.2 Detailing the Public Sphere Conception

Habermas shows, by way of his formal pragmatic analysis of everyday communication, that every participant attempting to undertake argumentation must make reference to a number of 'strong idealizations' or 'idealizing suppositions' (Cooke, 1994:30). In other words, formal pragmatics identifies the necessary pragmatic presuppositions of moral-practical discourse. Given that the public sphere is constituted through moral-practical discourse, these presuppositions point to a set of normative conditions of the public sphere. I will discuss further the normative status of the conception in Chapter Three. Here, I will simply outline the set of requirements of the public sphere as specified by my reading of Habermas' reconstruction of the presuppositions of communicative rationality.

The first condition is the requirement of reciprocal critique that sets the basic structure of argumentation.

i. Thematization and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims

Argumentation demands the putting forward, and subsequent critique, of political claims that are criticizable, that is, backed with reasons rather than mere assertions (Habermas, 1984:25-26, 1990:87-88).

This reciprocal critique becomes meaningless if positions do not change when found wanting. In other words, this first requirement presupposes reflexivity.

ii. Reflexivity

In argumentation 'participants question and transcend whatever their initial preferences may have been' (Habermas, 1992a:449). This means, communicative rationality demands reflexivity: the critical examination of one's cultural values, assumptions, and interests, as well as of the larger social context. The examination of pre-discursive positions within discourse distinguishes publicly oriented citizens from private individuals.

To be reflexive participants must firstly have attained a certain level of communicative competence – the level of postconventional communicative competence needed to take up a critical distance from one's position and to call into question all sources of validity outside of argumentation. This postconventional communicative competence has largely been attained within liberal democratic cultures. However, such competence does not guarantee reflexivity in argumentation. Participants must 'accept' the challenge to reflexivity made when validity claims are offered in discourse.[24] This presupposes the *hearing* of opposing claims and reasons, which requires that participants put themselves in the position of the other, a condition encapsulated by the notion of ideal role taking.

iii. Ideal role taking

Mutual understanding, the aim of communicative reason, pre-supposes 'ideal role taking', that is, participants putting themselves in the position of the other and trying to see the situation from the other's perspective (Habermas, 1987a, 1996; McCarthy, 1992:54). This demands an attitude of impartiality and equal respect (Chambers, 1995:239). Impartiality refers to treating all arguments in fairness and without biases such as ethnocentrism. Equal respect refers to treating the other as an equal dialogue partner, proceeding on the assumption that they have something worthwhile to say (ibid). Both impartiality and equal respect demand empathetic listening. Above all, this presupposition entails that participants approach the discussion with an attitude of seeking understanding and agreement, of resolving rather than aggravating or bypassing conflict. This attitude, in turn, demands a commitment to working through differences, a commitment to *ongoing* ideal role taking.

[24] The reflexivity involved in argumentation may or may not be a conscious activity. Hence I have referred to reflexivity rather than reflection. For further discussion of this distinction, see Beck (1994).

Taking the position of the other assumes that relevant identities, needs, aims, interests, and information have been put forward honestly. Indeed, all communicative action presupposes the truthfulness of expressions, '[t]hat the manifest intention of the speaker is meant as it is expressed' (Habermas, 1984:99). This presupposition makes up the fourth condition: sincerity.

iv. Sincerity

Dialogue in the public sphere is premised upon publicity or discursive openness in contrast to deception. For a position to be rationally judged, each participant must make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information and their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires (Benhabib, 1992:109). Sincerity is indicated by an interlocutor's consistency across and between their speech acts and physical actions (Chambers, 1996:208).

The previous three demands, that participants in argumentation engage reflexively, respectfully, and sincerely, are supported by requirements of inclusion and equality.[25]

v. Inclusion

Communicative rationality requires that that all relevant positions and objections be heard. Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration and with the competence to speak and act (that is, the ability to undertake the above requirements) must be allowed to take part.

Even when inclusion is formalized, informal restrictions may hinder participation, restrictions that result from social and cultural inequalities. Inclusion can be limited by inequalities from outside of discourse, such as when a certain level of material wealth or education is required to take part in proceedings. It can also be limited by inequalities within discourse, where some dominate discourse and others feel excluded and withdraw altogether. Hence, the demand for inclusion overlaps with, and presupposes, discursive equality.

[25] The requirements for inclusion and equality are most explicitly outlined by Habermas (1990:89, 1996:305-306) in his discussion of discourse ethics and his outline of the deliberative democratic procedure for formal publics. While Habermas' discourse ethics and procedure for formal publics both draw from the reconstruction of communicative rationality, it is not necessary to outline them here in order to develop a normative conception of the public sphere.

vi. Discursive equality

Rational discourse requires that everyone has an equal opportunity to introduce and question any assertion whatever and to express attitudes, desires, and needs.

The requirements of inclusion and equality are reinforced by the presupposition that to offer a *criticizable* validity claim means that no force should be exerted, 'whether it arises from within the process of reaching understanding itself (internal coercion) or influences it from the outside (external coercion) – except the force of better argument' (Habermas, 1984:25).[26]

The exclusion of internal coercion is already covered by requirements *iii-vi* above and implies the elimination of the effects of deception, power, and ideology.[27] This elimination, in turn, requires 'a reciprocal openness of actors about their true intentions and motives and an equal chance to express their attitudes, feelings and needs' (White, 1988:56). On the other hand, being free of external coercion means firstly that argumentation is not to be bound by the authority of prior norms or requirements and secondly, that the discourse is not constrained by state and economic interests.[28] The first demand, for open critique, is covered by conditions *i*, *ii*, *v*, and *vi* above. The second demand, for freedom from state and commercial power, leads to the seventh condition.

vii. Autonomy from system

Discourse must be autonomous from the steering media of money and administrative power because the latter utilize purposive rationality that, as outlined earlier, can displace communicative rationality and thereby undermine discourse in the public sphere.

These seven presuppositions of communicative rationality delineate a normative conception of the public sphere that I can utilize for my critical evaluation of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. I have summarized the requirements in Figure 2.2

[26] Internal coercion takes place within the argumentative exchange while external coercion comes from the larger social context within which the discourse is placed (Habermas, 1984:25, 1996:305-306).

[27] The question of power within discourse will be looked at in Chapter Three and then highlighted when evaluating online discourse in Chapters Six and Seven.

[28] Social inequality is a form of external coercion that limits discursive equality and inclusion. It cannot simply be overcome by insulating discourse from economic interests as required by the requirement of autonomy. Substantive social equality is required. This will become clear later in this thesis. I also offer a detailed discussion of the relationship between the public sphere and social inequality in Appendix Two.

below to draw attention to their significance in this thesis and for later reference. The status of this conception, as socially grounded norm, will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

Figure 2.2 The Public Sphere Conception

i.	Exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims
ii.	Reflexivity
iii.	Ideal role taking
iv.	Sincerity
v.	Inclusion
vi.	Discursive equality
vii.	Autonomy from system

I will now turn to the fundamental presupposition of communicative rationality underlying all the above conditions: that moral-practical discourse in the public sphere aims towards reaching understanding or consensus. I will show how it reinforces the conditions of Figure 2.2 by demanding that participants be motivated towards a rational conversation involving moral respect for the other. But simply showing that 'reaching understanding' reinforces the conditions of moral-practical discourse is not the reason why I will be giving special attention to it. I intend to examine 'reaching understanding' in detail because it points beyond the conditions of discourse to the end point of argumentation: the formation of public opinion by which citizens can influence decision making and come to form a sovereign democratic public.

2.5.3 Public Opinion Formation

If rational discourse is the means for the constitution of the public sphere, public opinion is the ends. Habermas believes that public opinion formed from rational discourse in the public sphere enables public sovereignty by holding decision makers accountable to citizens. While I am not interested here in the formal decision making of government, I do need to specify what public opinion looks like and what its formation involves. To understand the process of public opinion formation we need to look at Habermas' conception of *Verständigung,* which is interpreted as reaching intersubjective understanding or agreement. Habermas sees *Verständigung* as the telos of communicative rationality. In other words, the aim of reaching understanding or agreement is presupposed in every act of moral-practical discourse. But

public opinion is also what is formed through discourse in the public sphere. Hence, *Verständigung* can be equated with the process of public opinion formation.

Verständigung is central to the theory of communicative action but can be rather confusing to define as it can mean anything from linguistic comprehension to consensus over moral-practical validity claims. Habermas (1979:3) explains:

> The goal of coming to understanding [*Verständigung*] is to bring about an agreement [*Einverständnis*] that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another. Agreement is based on recognition of the corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness. We can see that the word understanding is ambiguous. In its minimal meaning it indicates that two subjects understand a linguistic expression in the same way; its maximal meaning is that between the two there exists an accord concerning the rightness of an utterance in relation to a mutually recognized normative background. In addition, two participants in communication can come to an understanding about something in the world, and they can make their intentions understandable to one another.

The weakest sense of reaching understanding is the claim to linguistic comprehensibility. In every communicative act, we must presuppose that we can use the same expressions in the same way (Habermas, 1984:307). As Habermas (1992b:477) asserts, 'if we don't presuppose that we can assign the same meaning to the same terms, we wouldn't even start to speak.'

Comprehensibility is also a condition for the strictest sense of understanding, which is agreement over the universal validity of moral-practical (and theoretical) claims.[29] Habermas explains that, in moral-practical argumentation,

> the meaning of the problematic validity claim conceptually forces participants to assume that a rationally motivated agreement could in principle be achieved, whereby the phrase "in principle" expresses the idealizing proviso: if only the

[29] Callinicos (1989:105) charges Habermas with conflating understanding and agreement. However, Habermas agrees with Callinocus when the latter asserts that we can *understand* what someone is saying without *agreeing* with them. Central to argumentation is the idea that a claim may be fully understood and yet rejected.

> argumentation could be conducted openly enough and continued long enough. (Habermas, 1984:42)

The possibility of consensus is presupposed in all moral-practical argumentation because the nature of moral matters is such that participants have to work towards agreement in order to live together peacefully. Participants in moral-practical argumentation are necessarily motivated towards agreement. Yet, in the absence of coercion, consensus can only be *guaranteed* if dialogue is continued indefinitely. *Verständigung* extends no exacting demand that moral-practical discourse in the public sphere must in fact reach final consensus. 'Consensual agreement, if and when it does emerge, emerges gradually and is fragmentary and partial' (Chambers, 1995:250). This means that public opinion, the result of moral-practical discourse in the public sphere, is always in the *process* of formation.[30]

It is helpful to take a moment to contrast this conception with those consensus models of public opinion promoted by liberalism and communitarianism introduced in Chapter One. In the deliberative model, according to Habermas (1992a:447), public opinion formation does not follow 'the premise of the liberal model . . . that the only way in which irreconcilably conflicting interests can be "brought to terms" is through a strategically conducted struggle.' The liberal conception of public opinion is posited upon the aggregation of private interests of autonomous subjects. The deliberative model, based upon communicative action, offers an intersubjective conception of public opinion.

> Public opinion is not representative in the statistical sense. It is not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons. Hence it must not be confused with survey results. Political opinion polls provide a certain reflection of "public opinion" only if they have been preceded by a focused public debate and a corresponding opinion-formation in a mobilized public sphere. (Habermas, 1996:362)

At the same time, public opinion does not refer to Rousseau's 'general will', which Habermas (1992a:445) calls 'the false model of a formation of will.' In STPS he criticizes Rousseau's 'democracy of non-public opinion' because Rousseau conceives of the general will as a 'consensus of hearts rather than of argument' (ibid). Habermas rejects this civic-

[30] This emphasis upon the *process* of public opinion formation rather than upon reaching final consensus sidesteps criticism, by the likes of Lyotard (1984), that Habermas puts forward a consensus model of democratic discourse that fails to account for the irreducible diversity of moral positions.

republican or communitarian notion of a homogeneity of background moral convictions that each individual is always already imbued with and that are merely to be (re)discovered as the will of the common subject.

Habermas (1996:103) rejects these subject-centred conceptions, the 'transcendental ego of the *Critique of Practical Reason* or the people of the *Social Contract*' – the will of the individual and the will of the communal macrosubject. Against these he posits the discursive opinion- and will-formation of a reasoning public. As already indicated, rather than a *consensus* of wills or hearts, the process of public opinion formation or *Bildung* occurs through rational deliberation aimed towards mutual understanding.[31] Chambers (1995:238-239) develops this point nicely:

> The rationality of public opinion and will formation in general does not depend on citizens reaching a rational consensus on all issues. A discursively formed public opinion can represent a process of *Bildung* or education in which citizens build better foundations to their opinions through discursive interaction. Through discursive interaction on various issues from who are we? to the best means of securing deficit reduction, citizens become more informed about the issues; they become aware of what others think and feel; they re-evaluate their positions in light of criticism and argument; in short, by defending their opinions with reason their opinions become more reasoned. The result of such interaction is that public opinion and the exercise of democratic responsibility are embedded in reasoned convictions, although reasoned convictions do not always need to reflect a consensus on an issue.

Private individuals are transformed into public citizens through the *learning process* of deliberation. This idea does not force consensus, as may be the case in strong forms of communitarianism. Yet, in contrast to liberal individualism, the deliberative learning process demands individuals examine their own motives, interests, and needs, in light of others' motives, interests, and needs. This re-emphasizes the public sphere requirements already outlined in Figure 2.2. The presupposition of reaching understanding or agreement

[31] As emphasized by Jeremy Shapiro's (1970) translator's preface in *Toward a Rational Society*: '*Bildung* literally means "formation," but also "education" and (cultural) "cultivation." In German these narrower meanings always connote an overall developmental process. *Willensbildung*, literally the "formation of will,". . .[is] translated as "decision making." Given the meaning of *Bildung*, *Willensbildung* emphasizes the process (of deliberation and discourse) through which a decision was "formed," not the moment at which it was "made."'

as the process of public opinion formation, is already taken care of by the seven public sphere requirements. The examination of the concept of public opinion in this section thus does not add any more conditions to the public sphere conception. My examination does, however, orient us to the purpose of public deliberation aimed towards mutual understanding: the development of 'strong' citizenry who, through the force of constituted public opinion, can hold government democratically accountable.

The way in which public opinion comes to influence decision making is very complex, but history has shown that the necessary requirement is a strong public sphere. While public opinion is most readily turned into formal policy when it is linked with accountable democratic decision-making bodies, even in totalitarian regimes public opinion can be, and is, effective (see Dryzek, 1996:48-56).[32] In fact, government sensitive to public opinion largely develops as a result of pressure from public opinion in the first place. It is the practice of rational deliberation, as set out in Figure 2.2, that is the first and most essential pre-requisite for the expansion of strong (deliberative) democracy.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced a normative conception of the public sphere based upon Habermas' reconstruction of the presuppositions of communicative rationality. This conception is what 'we' as deliberative democrats must aspire towards in our informal public deliberations in order to develop rational public opinion by which to guide formal decision making. Most important for me here is that the set of requirements of the public sphere outlined in this chapter will enable me to undertake a critical evaluation of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. I have also shown how Habermas' system-lifeworld theory provides a sociological contextualization of the public sphere conception. This contextualization not only illustrates the social basis of communicative rationality but points to the socio-cultural processes both enabling and inhibiting the public sphere within modern capitalist society.

[32] This thesis concentrates upon the development of public opinion within the informal public sphere rather than upon the impact of this opinion upon government. However, I have provided in Appendix One a discussion of what is required to maximize the effectiveness of public opinion. The question of how online public opinion may effectively feed into the wider public sphere and official decision making is also considered in Chapter Seven.

The need for communications media to enable the formation of an effective public sphere has largely been assumed within my discussions so far. Within complex, globalized polities, communications media, in combination with physical public spaces, are required to provide for interaction, expression of opinions, and the transfer of public information. The Internet is seen by many as an exemplary communications medium in this regard. It is the intention of this thesis to explore the extent to which the Internet is facilitating the public sphere and show how it can do so more. In Chapters Four to Seven I will utilize the public sphere conception and system-lifeworld thesis to critically evaluate this problem: to not only measure the extent to which online practices approximate the criteria of the public sphere, but identify those social and cultural factors advancing or inhibiting the full realization of the public sphere through the Internet.

To undertake this evaluation, the set of requirements of the public sphere outlined in this chapter must be defensible. I have dealt with a number of criticisms of the conception in this chapter, including those that raise questions in relation to singular versus multiple publics, the public/private distinction, and the notion of consensus. In the next chapter, I will investigate three challenges to the conception that put its status as a socially grounded norm for critique of contemporary practices into question. I begin by considering the claim that a critical norm such as the public sphere simply cannot be developed. I then look at the argument that the public sphere conception downplays certain forms of discourse, which both limits the resources necessary for reaching understanding and leads to discursive exclusions. Finally, I will consider claims that the public sphere conception is outmoded in relation to the so-called 'hyperreality' of cyberspace. I will need to fully investigate all three challenges, and provide convincing rebuttals, if the public sphere conception is to be successfully used to analyse the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere.

Chapter 3 In Defence of the Public Sphere Conception

3.1 Introduction

Habermas' theory of communicative action illuminates a normative conception of the public sphere immanent in postconventional communicative practice. This public sphere conception, in combination with Habermas' system-lifeworld theory, enables a critical evaluation of the Internet's actual and possible contribution to political debate within society. Before I can carry out this investigation however, the public sphere conception must be defended against critics who dispute its claim to offer a means by which to critically analyse Internet practices. A number of general critiques have already been answered when defining the public sphere in terms of communicative rationality in the previous chapter. Against common misreadings, I have argued that the public sphere is not simply drawn from the ideas and practices of a certain class at a certain historical point; that the public/private distinction is not a division of content but of communicative form; that rational discourse emphasizes the process of reaching understanding more than consensus; and that although the public sphere is a singular entity it also accounts for the operation of multiple publics. In this chapter I concentrate upon critiques that bear directly upon the validity of the public sphere as defined by communicative rationality. Habermas' notion of communicative rationality has proved controversial and it is only possible to examine the most relevant criticisms here. I will focus upon those critiques that challenge the adequacy of the public sphere concept as a critical norm for the evaluation of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. In this regard, there are three relevant areas of criticism.

First, some postmodern critics argue that the radical contextuality of knowledge means that we simply cannot derive context-transcending norms, such as the public sphere conception, from everyday practice. Against this, I explain how Habermas' theory of communicative action illuminates a cross-cultural yet socially grounded normative basis for the public sphere conception. I do not attempt to undertake the extensive linguistic and philosophical analysis that would be necessary to investigate the formal pragmatics and theory of social development that Habermas employs to support his theory. Such an investigation would take me far away from the social and political concerns of this thesis. However, I do argue that Habermas' formulation does point towards a critical basis for the public sphere within everyday practice. Accepting the fallibility and uncertainty involved in this proposition, I

turn from the metatheoretical level to questions of the adequacy of the public sphere for the evaluation of democratic practice in general and online interaction in particular.

The second set of criticisms argue that the requirements of the public sphere conception privilege 'rationalistic' over 'aesthetic-affective' modes of discourse, a privileging that not only limits the available resources for reaching understanding but also results in discursive inequalities and exclusions. As such, the public sphere conception is seen as inconsistent with its own democratic demands for discursive equality and inclusion. In response, I show how, despite Habermas' personal biases, the conception does make room for the aesthetic-affective aspects of discourse, at least to the extent that they allow inclusion and equality.

Finally, I investigate criticisms that deem the public sphere conception invalid in relation to online practices. Cyberspace is believed to represent a 'hyperreality' that radically deconstructs the 'modernist assumptions' behind Habermas' analysis. In response to this critique, I argue that the Internet does indeed alter interactions in new ways, but that the changes that result are not as radically and homogeneously hyperreal as some cyber-theorists claim, and, furthermore, that these changes *are* able to be taken into account by the public sphere conception.

3.2 Exploring the Critical Status of the Public Sphere Conception

Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty support Habermas' quest for democratic discourse within a pluralist society and yet have also been two of the most vocal and passionate postmodern critics of Habermas' theory of communicative rationality. They argue that knowledge is so radically contingent that there is simply no way of finding or deriving a set of universal, normative criteria by which to judge everyday practices.[1] This claim needs to be effectively countered if the public sphere conception, formalized in Figure 2.2, is to be utilized for a critical analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere.

[1] The critique here involves some philosophical terms that need clarification in order to avoid, as far as possible, misunderstandings. I use transcendence to mean going beyond *immediate* situated experience. We can distinguish between a transcultural notion of transcendentalism that acknowledges its historical character and an ahistorical Kantian transcendentalism that involves the supra-sensible. The latter would be seen as metaphysical. Metaphysics is used here to mean the (speculative) philosophical establishment of indisputable first principles that serve as foundations for all other knowledges. This often involves a Cartesian subject approaching the world from an Archimedean perspective and/or the exploration of the realm of the transcendent. By universal, I mean that which includes all phenomena of a certain class over all times and places. It is important to note that a universal is not necessarily either metaphysical or transcendental.

In what follows I will investigate Lyotard's and Rorty's arguments, asking whether the public sphere conception needs to be abandoned as a critical norm for judgement, or whether there is in fact a way around their critiques.

While sharing with Habermas the aim of securing justice in conditions of social plurality, Lyotard (1984) argues that it is impossible to find or develop universal criteria for judgement given the irreducible diversity of language games and the incredulity to metanarratives that characterize the postmodern condition.[2] In terms of democracy, there can be no cross-cultural criteria to judge better or worse discursive practice. Rules of discourse can only be local: agreed upon by the 'players' involved, drawing upon mini-narratives, and subject to cancellation. Using any more than local criteria for judgement is seen by Lyotard as terroristic, leading to violence against difference – the imposition of culturally specific knowledge (dressed up as universals) on diversity.

The rejection of universal criteria of judgment leads Lyotard to promote a pagan politics, a mode of action characterized by the impiety of proceeding without criteria (Lyotard and Thebaud, 1985). Yet Lyotard's concern for maintaining multiplicity forces him to consider the relativistic consequences of paganism. How are we to ensure heterogeneity without criteria for judgement? How can we adjudicate between opposing narratives when legitimacy only resides within each mininarrative? In order to escape this aporia, Lyotard puts aside his antipathy to universal criteria of judgement and adopts a neo-Kantian transcendent to guard against the terroristic domination of one language game over others. He invokes an Idea of justice to serve as a regulative ideal. Although still not wanting to delineate procedures, he offers a form of the categorical imperative: 'in matters of justice, act in such a way as to regulate all your actions to be in conformity with the idea of multiplicity' (Lyotard and Thebaud, 1985:94-95). Despite what Honneth (1985:154) refers to Lyotard's 'aversion against the "general", against any universalism at all', Lyotard calls upon a universal prescriptive, a 'justice of multiplicity', to ensure a multiplicity of justices (Lyotard and Thebaud, 1985:100).[3] But from where does he get this universal? Lyotard admits that, when speaking of the necessity of a certain transcendence to his prescriptive, 'I do not know

[2] The notion of a language game comes from Wittgenstein's analogy between using language and playing games. In both there are various rules or conventions that determine what moves are permissible and how success is gained. A move can only be judged according to the rules of the game to which it belongs.

[3] This move is shared by other postmodern theorists. While explicitly discarding criteria for normative judgement they implicitly assume normative criteria in their so-called 'situated critiques' (Benhabib, 1992:227-228). As Turner (1998:26) concludes from his sympathetic study of postmodern political positions, including those of Lyotard and Rorty, 'some commitment to universalism,

who is sending me the prescription in question' (ibid:69). Motivated by securing difference, Lyotard ends up invoking a universal criteria for critique but refuses to explain its source.

Rorty similarly argues against the establishment of universal norms of critique, but he also attempts to avoid Lyotard's compromises. It is 'impossible', Rorty (1996:334) argues, 'to say that one language of moral and political deliberation, and the set of social practices intertwined with that language, is more rational than another.' This leads Rorty to celebrate and promote the maximization of cultural diversity. But, as with Lyotard's paganism, such a project has self imposed limitations. While democracy may be the best means available for maximizing diversity, there are no cross-cultural criteria by which to judge and promote democracy as more rational than any other form of politics. According to Rorty (1997:19-12), all that we can do when people disagree is hope 'that somewhere among their shared beliefs and desires there may be enough resources to permit agreement on how to coexist without violence.' He admits that there are no guarantees that difference will be respected. An interlocutor may not 'share enough relevant beliefs and desires to make possible fruitful conversation about an issue in dispute.' In this case, we have to 'settle for working out a *modus vivendi* – one which may involve the threat, or even the use, of force.' Rather than offering a critical position from which to promote democracy and multiplicity, we are offered a politics legitimated solely by contingency, by our loyalties, solidarities, hopes, and imagination, in which we fight for those with whom we most identify and sympathize. While Rorty personally believes in pluralism and democracy, he offers no cross-cultural criteria by which to deem difference as better than homogeneity, or more generally, to judge one form of politics as better than another.

The postmodern promoters of multiplicity find themselves faced with a seemingly unresolvable contradiction. They reject universal criteria for judgement and critique in order to maximize plurality, but *cannot* maximize plurality without some sort of universal criteria. While Rorty accepts the compromises and uncertainties that this suggests for securing plurality, Lyotard's concern for justice leads him to make the contradictory move of invoking a universal prescriptive for his pagan politics.

Is it then impossible to develop cross-cultural normative criteria for critical analysis? Does a socially grounded position simply have to accept what Benhabib (1996b:69) calls Rorty's 'ethnocentric liberalism', or a form of communitarianism based on pre-defined virtues, or a

typically as a residual category, is embraced by theorists who want to adopt a resolutely anti-foundationalist or contextualist position. Postmodern relativist epistemologies are often combined with the search for a common basis for politics and morality.'

liberal individualism based upon self-interest? Habermas emphatically answers 'No!' Through his theory of communicative action he provides a strategy by which we can differentiate sociologically grounded norms from metaphysical dogma. He claims to have identified a universal yet post-metaphysical basis for communicative rationality and thus the public sphere conception.[4] How does he do this?

Habermas produces a post-metaphysical status for communicative rationality through its definition and derivation. Communicative rationality is defined as *inter-subjective*, *formal*, and *differentiated* and derived from *everyday social action* via *fallible* and *socially situated* scientific approaches. I will discuss each of these six italicised elements in turn. First, communicative rationality is seen as situated in the pragmatic structures of language rather than the consciousness of pre-discursive subjects. Second, communicative rationality is defined formally rather than substantively. It does not specify an exemplary way of life and set of values but rather a mode of reasoning. Third, propositional-theoretical truth is decentred. As seen in the previous chapter, Habermas develops a multidimensionality within the unity of reason: there is a complex interplay between the theoretical, moral-practical, and expressive-aesthetic elements of rationality. This differentiated conception of reason overcomes the bias towards propositional truth and cognitive processes in Western philosophy (that is, it overcomes logocentrism) (Cooke, 1994:40-41).

The next three aspects of the post-metaphysical status of communicative rationality come from the conception's derivation. Communicative rationality is derived from the development of reason in the actual historical practices and concrete social life of modern societies rather than conceived abstractly and ahistorically. Furthermore, the conception is fallibilistic because, in contrast to Kant, Habermas (see, for instance, 1987a:399) argues that the knowledge produced by reconstructive sciences is hypothetical, not a transcendental-absolute. It is subject to the usual methods of empirical testing (must remain open to checking against speakers' intuitions, scattered across as broad a sociological spectrum as possible) and it relies upon indirect substantiation through coherence within a set of overlapping theories and empirical findings (Cooke, 1994:2,39). This process of substantiation points to the final post-metaphysical aspect, that the philosophical-scientific derivation is influenced by the social situation of inquiry. Habermas (see especially 1971) has argued strongly against the positivist or 'scientistic' separation of explanation from

[4] Habermas sets out his declared post-metaphysical position in the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987a), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987b), *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990), and *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992c).

interpretation, and knowledge from values, understandings, and interests. There is no absolutely neutral standpoint for inquiry on which to build culturally unmediated foundations. The work of the critical inquirer is always culturally encoded because it is always socially situated. The claims of critical theory are justified via a discourse informed by cultural understandings. As Rainer Forst (1996:143-144) emphasizes, a critical social theory

> is not just a theory *about* society, it is also one *within* society: its critical normative claims are valid if they are "reasonable" in the sense of being reciprocally and generally justifiable, i.e., with reasons that are undeniable *for* the establishment of institutions that make communicative autonomy possible, and as arguments *within* a discourse among social actors recognized as free and equal.

Discursive agreement amongst socially situated inquirers is the final foundation for human knowledge and understanding: 'the unsettled ground of rationally motivated agreement among participants in argumentation is our only foundation – in questions of physics no less than in morality' (Habermas, cited in Roderick, 1986:10). The public sphere conception is thus more than an objectively deduced product of scientific observations and philosophical investigations. Its articulation takes place within a discourse which draws upon various cultural values and understandings. The particular situation of research informs the choices that are made, such as the choices of whose practices we idealize from and how we abstract from these practices.

As postmetaphysical, how can the public sphere conception also claim the universal or even cross-cultural, critical status needed to judge everyday practice? Habermas counters moral scepticism by pointing out that communicative rationality is already presupposed *within* post-conventional communication. It can be detected *within* every discourse, even within the arguments of the postmodern critics.[5] As Best (1995:195) notes,

> Habermas' theory of communicative rationality inescapably trumps any general argument that postmodernists [and others] could make against it, since whoever

[5] The subtleties and tactical astuteness of Habermas' theory are often missed or ignored. For instance, as McCarthy (1990:xxiii, n8) argues, some of Habermas' critics have dismissed his universal reason because of confusing universal claims with transcendental ones, 'forgetting that the latter aspire to necessity as well as universality. . . . [U]niversal claims need not be based on a priori reasoning or pretend to infallibility. The shoe is actually on the other foot: on what grounds do anti-universalists claim to know – a priori? – that there are and can be no universals of language, culture, cognition, morality, and the like?' Moreover, how do anti-rationalists know that their own arguments do not invoke the universal structures of communicative rationality?

> strays into the realm of argumentative discourse and wishes to communicate and validate an argument cannot avoid at least implicit reference to the norms of argumentation itself, such as Habermas clarifies in his theory.

The presuppositions of communicative rationality, illuminated by Habermas' formal pragmatic reconstruction, provide a universal basis for normative critique when supported by his theory of social development. Habermas sidesteps moral relativism by arguing that moral-practical discourse 'can be understood as the product of a learning process whereby the *universal* structure of communicative reason comes to fruition' (Chambers, 1996:140). Lyotard, along with others, would protest that the death of metaphysics has rendered such a meta-narrative unconvincing. But even postmodernists such as Lyotard (see his 1984 work) require large socio-historical narratives and meta-theories in order to develop convincing social explanations. While we must reject dogmatic metaphysical pronouncements, inquirers can reflexively and effectively employ social theory as well as science and philosophy to look beyond their socio-cultural context.[6] We can develop general or large narratives of cross-cultural social processes, developmental logics and tendencies, such as rationalization, democratization, and individualization.[7] So, Habermas is able to draw upon social theory, science, and philosophy to clarify the universal yet postmetaphysical status of communicative rationality. He claims that communicative rationality is not simply based upon cultural 'conventions' but upon the 'inescapable presuppositions' of communication embedded in the language structures of human development, in the very character of human action itself.

Critical theorists, in contrast to the postmodernist position examined above, are generally sympathetic to Habermas' aims of seeking a postmetaphysical foundation for critique. However, many have also found flaws with his philosophical-scientific reconstruction.[8] Significant problems have been identified in both Habermas' formal pragmatics and in his

[6] On the one hand, Habermas (1990:14-20) argues that philosophy cannot transcendentally ground social critique, that it cannot provide an a-priori indisputable foundation outside historical and social existence. On the other hand, rejecting such foundationalism does not mean doing away with philosophy altogether. Rather, it means that philosophy must now work alongside empirical science. This is what Habermas attempts to do in the theory of communicative action. '[F]or Habermas, the epistemological and systematic claims of philosophy can only be carried out as social theory' (Roderick, 1986:7).

[7] For further on the importance, and indeed possibility, of retaining meta-narratives for critical theory while rejecting metaphysical foundations, see Best (1995), Best and Kellner (1991), and Calhoun (1995).

[8] See for example Benhabib (1992), Best (1995), McCarthy (1985), and Rasmussen (1990).

moral evolutionary theory.[9] These methods fail to fully provide the necessary foundations. To secure the universal, normative status claimed for communicative rationality, Habermas seems to rely upon metaphysical assumptions (such as the priority of communicative reason and a universal subject endowed with certain moral capacities). Moreover, critics argue that by claiming to have *scientifically* reconstructed communicative rationality, while actually making use of metaphysical assumptions, Habermas succumbs to the very scientism and technical mystification he has so vigorously opposed. However unwitting, Habermas' reconstruction reproduces a technocratic ideology in which rigorous or 'value-free' scientific explanation is used to legitimate and mask a particular position as a universal norm.

Of course, Habermas rejects such charges, explicitly pointing to the fallibility and situatedness of his critical analysis. However, his abstract, deductive, and seemingly obfuscatory form of analysis, when combined with his claim to have found an emancipatory potential via scientific investigation, lends strong support to suspicions of the presence of metaphysics and scientism. Ironically, Habermas' approach stems largely from his relentless quest to enable critical theory to overcome metaphysics and ideology. While Habermas does in fact offer good reasons (such as fallibility and situatedness) for why his critical formulation could be deemed post-metaphysical, his actual derivation suffers from too much meta-theoretical deduction and not enough social and political grounding.[10] His 'scientific reconstruction' generally takes place via the re-examination and synthesis of other theories. What is more, the secondary literature that has developed around Habermas' theory of communicative action has itself emerged at an abstract, philosophical level, with little direct analysis of the actual social and political processes concerned.

Best (1995) and Calhoun (1995) argue that for critical theory to find normative criteria it must turn from philosophical deductions and meta-theory to 'real' (social) history.[11] An

[9] In the case of formal pragmatics, Culler (1985) argues that Habermas fails to show that communicative action is in fact the primary mode of language use from which all other uses of language are 'parasitic.' In the case of the theory of moral evolution (and specifically, the development of communicative competence), a central criticism has been Habermas' uncritical reliance upon the controversial empirical findings of Piaget and Kohlberg (see Benhabib, 1992). For more extensive critique of the theory of communicative action see, for instance, Honneth and Joas (1991) and Rasmussen (1990).

[10] The quest for post-metaphysical foundations for critique, as Best (1995:226) argues, has bogged Habermas down in abstract metatheortetical issues, distracting him from the central task of critical theory, that of engaging in social critique and political analysis.

[11] This is where some of the more grounded postmodern work can be helpful to critical theory. As Best (1995:198-199) argues, 'a postmodern critique can push Habermas' thought further in the direction of diversity, contingency, historical specificity, and concrete practice.' As such,

historical grounding of critical theory certainly has its possibilities, but it also has limitations. This is clearly demonstrated by the early Habermas' ideology critique in STPS, which failed to develop an adequate normative conception of the public sphere from the democratic ideals and practices of the bourgeoisie. Historical analysis should complement rather than replace philosophy and scientific reconstruction. Indeed, Habermas' theory of social development attempts to do just this. However, I will not here review the adequacy of Habermas own historical analysis nor explore how history in general can further support the normative criteria of critical theory. Neither will I attempt to find answers to the various empirical limitations of Habermas' reconstruction that have left room for the suspicions of metaphysics and scientism. Any such attempt would necessitate an extensive investigation of moral-philosophy and a scientific analysis of language structures that would not only take me a long way away from the focus of this thesis but would risk leading further into the abstract meta-theoretical mire criticized above. I do, however, believe that the theory of communicative action *points towards* a universal, critical basis for the public sphere conception within everyday moral-practical discourse. In other words, Habermas' thesis offers enough evidence to support a reasonably convincing account, at least one that provides a working hypothesis. The presuppositions of moral-practical discourse indeed seem unavoidable and Habermas' theory of modern rationalization, that provides communicative rationality with a certain priority, is persuasive. This, of course, does not provide final philosophical grounding nor scientific validation. I will leave such problems to the social philosopher, linguistic analyst, and theoretical interpreter. I will accept for the time being that the public sphere conception bears a facticity that remains open to critique and revision.

My acceptance, however tentative, of the critical status of communicative rationality and the public sphere does not mean that I can simply bypass all critiques of the public sphere conception. The conception's fallibility and contextuality means that I need to confront criticisms that put into question the validity of the norm with respect to the particular concerns of this thesis. This is a task that is both more pressing and more clearly resolvable than that of providing the final confirmation of the critical status of the norm. I will investigate questions regarding the public sphere conception's validity in terms of the social practices it will be required to critique. In other words, I intend to ask if the public sphere conception provides an adequate democratic norm for the critique of Internet practices.

'postmodern theories do not necessarily destroy the attempt to provide foundations for critique, rather they can help reconstruct them' (ibid:230).

There are two sets of critique that challenge the public sphere conception's applicability in regards to the analysis of everyday (cyber) practices, both of which relate to the rationality promoted in the constructs definition. The first challenge sees the conception as privileging a certain 'rationalistic' form of discourse that downplays 'aesthetic-affective' modes of discourse. This not only diminishes the resources for reaching understanding but leads to the exclusion of those persons less adept at employing the specific 'rationalistic' mode of discourse promoted in the conception. The second challenge also draws attention to the limitations of a rationally defined public sphere, this time arguing that it has no facticity in relation to cyber-interaction. Cyberspace is seen as a hyperreality that radically destabilizes the subject's sense of reality and the possibility for rational discourse. In the next two sections of this chapter I must provide a well-reasoned defence of the public sphere conception against these two sets of critique if I am to ensure that it can be adequately employed in my evaluation.

3.3 Accommodating the Aesthetic-Affective Aspects of Discourse

Habermas claims to offer a deontological theory of discourse, one that stipulates the form of argumentation and not its content. However, by specifying a certain form or style of discourse, the set of supposedly neutral requirements of the public sphere conception do, in fact, promote a substantive good. More specifically and worryingly, critics argue the public sphere requirements prioritize a rational, cognitive, and assertive form of discourse that downplays and even excludes aesthetic-affective modes of interaction. This exclusion not only limits the resources available for the task of reaching understanding, but also leads to discursive inequalities because of the differences in individual competencies in utilizing the privileged mode of discourse. Such inequality puts into question the consistency of the public sphere conception as a norm for democracy. I will now explore this line of critique, asking to what extent the public sphere conception can and should accommodate aesthetic-affective modes of discourse.

3.3.1 Exploring the Exclusion of Aesthetic-Affective Elements

The public sphere conception requires a reflexive, impartial, reasoned exchange of validity claims where only the force of better argument 'wins out.' Critics believe these requirements privilege a 'rationalistic' form of discourse, one that encourages representational accuracy, logical coherence, and a dispassionate (disembodied) contestation of opinions (Dahlgren, 1995:103; Young, 1996:123). They argue that the so-called universal norm of deliberation actually draws directly upon a very particular form of discourse, the

style of discourse valorized within modern Western philosophy and realized in the abstruse academic style of argument of both modern scholastic activity and the adjudication of the law court (Bohman, 1996:45; Dahlgren, 1995; Flax, 1992; Young, 1996:123).[12] This rationalist style, according to the critics, is defined against and to the exclusion of its 'other': those 'aesthetic-affective' styles of expression which include multiple modes of everyday communication such as rhetoric, myth, metaphor, play, poetry, theatre, ceremony, and bodily expressivity.[13] These *styles* of speaking are separated from moral-practical discourse and defined as non-rational and private.[14] The removal or repression of aesthetic-affective modes of everyday communication from rational discourse leads to the exclusion of certain identities – subjects of less 'rationalistic' linguistic communities – from the public sphere. This exclusion tends to involve women and non-Western persons, who more readily employ aesthetic-affective speaking styles in comparison to white males, the later being more prone to utilize the didactic, disembodied, confrontational style privileged by Habermas and by many other deliberative theorists (Young 1996:123-124).

The exclusion of aesthetic-affective modes of discourse is also seen by critics as linked to an attempt by Habermas to block unconscious (bodily) processes that he sees as inhibiting inter-subjective communication. The unconscious needs to be repressed in order to enable self reflection, autonomy, and rational communication.[15] This attempt to exclude the unconscious (aesthetic-affective) aspects from communicative rationality suggests, according to Dahlgren (1995), Flax (1992), and Young (1990), a failure to break with what Derrida refers to as the 'metaphysics of presence.' The metaphysics of presence is where unity and, thus, transparency of meaning is formed by the exclusion of all difference.

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[12] Given that Habermas draws upon Western culture for his models of universal reason, it is not surprising, as Young (1996:124 n10) points out, that his theory of communicative rationality has been read by some commentators as ethnocentric and culturally biased. However, adequate research has yet to be undertaken to decide whether, and the extent to which, communicative rationality can be said to be a specifically Western phenomenon.

[13] See for instance Dahlgren (1995:101), Flax (1992:246-247), Fraser (1992:224), Mainsbridge (1993:99), Squires (1998), and Young (1987:71-73, 1990:118).

[14] It is the form and not the content of discourse that is seen as excluding aesthetic-affective modes of interaction. As noted in Chapter Two, aesthetic tastes and feelings are the explicit subject matter in therapeutic critique and aesthetic criticism, and are also implicitly raised in discourse in the public sphere.

[15] Habermas tends to see the unconscious as a defective aspect of subjectivity. He suggests that we can 'clarify systematic distortions' blocking rationality through what he calls therapeutic critique (Elliot, 1992:109). Habermas (1984:21) declares that 'one who is capable of letting himself be enlightened about his irrationality . . . possesses the power to behave reflectively in relation to his subjectivity and to see through the irrational limitations to which his cognitive, moral-practical, and aesthetic-practical expressions are subject.'

Communicative rationality gains coherence, critics argue, by privileging the rationality side of the binary system reason/desire, mind/body, and conscious/unconscious. With the exclusion of the non-rational, meaning is contained and transparency achieved. With transparency, a direct transference of meaning between speaker and listener takes place that enables mutual understanding.[16] Transparency also involves a correspondence between a subject's utterance and aspects of one or more of the 'worlds' to which s/he refers. This implies a modernist conception of self-hood. Young (1987:70) argues that despite his insistence upon a break with subject centred reason, Habermas reasserts a rational, abstracted cogito. He presumes unified subjects who know themselves and can represent their interests, values, and feelings fully, and can enter into unity with others and the world in order to share the same meanings.[17]

Against Habermas, Dahlgren (1995:112) argues that the unconscious aspects of communication are not necessarily a negative force that need to be summarily removed: 'the unconscious is not just the site of dark forces, fear, conflict and repression, but also of creativity, imagination and renewal.' Nor can the unconscious (bodily, affective, and so on) aspects of communication be easily removed to reveal a rational meaning. Reason and desire are inextricably interlinked within communicative acts. As Flax (1992:241) emphasizes,

> Since the ego is first of all a "bodily ego", reason may be pervaded by desire – or the desire not to desire. The boundaries between psyche and soma, between desire, embodiment and thought are never impermeable or fixed. . . . Since unconscious processes operate outside of and by different rules from rational thought, their affects and hence rational processes can never be transparent or fully controlled.

[16] The assumption of immediacy between speech and meaning is what Derrida refers to as 'phonocentrism': the Western prioritizing of word over the written 'medium.' Suspicions of phonocentrism in Habermas' work are given support by the fact that Habermas, in contrast to Derrida but like Lyotard, emphasizes speaking or *parole* over linguistic system or *langue* (Best and Kellner, 1991:249).

[17] Many theorists have interpreted the notion of undistorted communication as invoking a transparency and transcendence that recalls the Cartesian subject. Peters (1993:564) points out that 'Habermas's citizens resemble Rousseau's "denatured" citizens perceiving the general will or Kant's world-citizens purged of all "particular interests" or John Rawls' citizens temporarily ignorant of their own particularities.' Poster (1995:48) argues that 'the subject for Habermas remains pre-given, pre-linguistic.' However, to assume a self capable of reason does not necessitate a Cartesian subject. As is emphasized throughout Chapter Two and will again be emphasized here, the deliberative public sphere is posited upon intersubjective rather than subject-centred rationality.

Habermas' understanding of argumentation, according to Young (1987:72), fails to take into account that meaning is always in excess of what can be understood discursively, spilling out beyond the symbolic. Rational communication cannot be separated out from the semiotic or figural aspects of utterances.[18] Young (1987:73) summarizes the problem well:

> There is no place in his [Habermas'] conception of linguistic interaction for the feeling that accompanies and motivates all utterances. In actual situations of discussion, tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, the use of irony, understatement or hyperbole, all serve to carry with the propositional message of the utterance another level of expression relating the participants in terms of attraction or withdrawal, confrontation or affirmation. Speakers not only say what they mean, but they say it excitedly, angrily, in a hurt or offended fashion and so on, and such emotional qualities of communication contexts should not be thought of as non- or prelinguistic. Recognizing such an aspect of utterances, however, involves acknowledging the irreducible multiplicity and ambiguity of meaning.

By removing (or repressing) unconscious bodily desires from rational communication, not only do inequalities and exclusions creep into discourse but a degree of meaning is lost and intersubjective understanding within discourse diminished. The aesthetic-affective modes of discourse offer important resources for communicative action that must be drawn upon in order to increase understanding.

Benhabib (1992), Dahlgren (1995), Fraser (1992), and Young (1996) all agree that some set of normative requirements are needed when working out how to live with difference. But they see the exclusions of various discursive styles as contradicting the public sphere's requirements of inclusion, equality, impartiality, mutual respect and the aim of coming to understanding. As such, the conception seems to be internally inconsistent. To rectify this problem, Young (1996), amongst others, argues that we must find a way to take aesthetic-

[18] Young (1987:71) draws upon Kristeva's theory of signification to illustrate the centrality of affective and bodily dimensions of meaning. According to Kristeva, every utterance has a 'symbolic' aspect, a referential function that situates a speaker in terms of a reality outside of themselves. This symbolic aspect is, according to Young, what Habermas valorizes. But there is also a 'semiotic' aspect to every utterance – the unconscious, bodily, sensuous aspects of utterances 'such as rhythm, tone of voice, metaphor, word play and gesture.' Similarly, Lash (1990), drawing upon Lyotard, emphasizes that in all signification both 'discourse' and 'figure' are present. The 'discursive', the form of communication Habermas prioritizes, proceeds by the rules and rational procedures of the ego and functions within the framework of the reality principle. The figural is the expression of desire and stems from the unconscious where the pleasure principle holds sway (Best and Kellner, 1991:149; Dahlgren, 1995:110). Discourse and figure are interwoven in communicative acts.

affective forms of communication more fully into account in democratic deliberation. Is this necessary? If so, how do we do this? In the following section I will show that what is required is a re-reading of the conception already posited, rather than its replacement by an alternative formulation.

3.3.2 Including the Aesthetic-Affective, Power, and the Overflow of Meaning

The public sphere conception does, in fact, make room for the aesthetic-affective aspects of discourse. As Young (1990:106-107, 118) indicates, it is Habermas' moral point of view and personal biases, and not the specific requirements of the public sphere conception, that are to blame for an interpretation of communicative rationality that suppresses the aesthetic-affective.[19] The requirements of the conception that are seen as most 'rationalistic' – reflexivity, impartiality, and the reasoned contestation of validity claims – do not necessarily exclude aesthetic-affective dimensions of interaction. Reflexivity should not be limited to systematic, analytical reflection but should also involve, as Lash (1994) emphasizes, aesthetic and hermeneutic dimensions; as well as logical self-monitoring, reflexivity involves intuition and imagination. The presumption that impartiality promotes non-emotional dialogue is especially suspect. Impartiality is meant to indicate, as Benhabib (1996b:82-83) notes, an ethic of 'fairness.' It combines with the ethic of mutual respect in enabling ideal role taking and offers positive support to the requirements of inclusion and equality.[20] It should encourage more rather than less expression. Finally, the reciprocal contestation of validity claims does not limit exchange to the dispassionate style of interrogation and

[19] Habermas has never hidden his distrust of the aesthetic-affective modes of expression being brought into moral discourse. In STPS he shows how aesthetic-affective forms can be utilized in representational publicity (in feudal pomp and modern public relations exercises) to manipulate public opinion. As a result he is 'frankly hostile to theatre, courtly forms, ceremony, the visual, and to rhetoric more generally' (Peters, 1993:562). He continues to be suspicious of oratory display as well as rhetoric (wit, irony, paradox, allusion, metaphor) as possibly deceptive (distortionary) modes of communicative action (Habermas, 1984:331, 1992a:426-427). In an interview given in October 1998, Habermas expresses his deep distrust of the aesthetic-affective. He begins the interview by referring to Germany's recently defeated Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, as the symbol of his own generation's reaction to the aesthetics of Nazism. Kohl represented, reflects Habermas (1998a:4), the 'almost bodily disavowal' of the 'political aesthetic' that had been central to 'the monstrous *mises-en-scène* of Nazi rallies or the Chaplinesque antics of our fascist mountebanks. Certainly we often groaned at the shapeless provincialism of Kohl's words and gestures. But I came to appreciate the deflation of sonorous vacuities and banalization of public ceremonies that went with it.' Habermas (ibid:12) concludes by positing the ideal form of republic as one in which there is 'a disposition which was suspicious of any rhetoric of the high or the deep, which resisted any aestheticization of politics, but also guarded against trivialization where the integrity and independence of the life of the mind was at stake.'

[20] Impartiality and mutual respect complement one another, combining taking the position of the *generalized (abstract) other* and taking the position of the *concrete (particular) other*. The combination provides adequate defence against critiques that communicative rationality does not make room for the concrete other. For more on how these conceptions can be synthesised within a theory of moral discourse, see Benhabib (1992).

analysis often found in modern law and science. The exchange of validity claims and reasons need not simply be equated with 'dry logic' but can be made up of a variety of aesthetic-affective forms. These include the three forms that Young (1996) identifies as excluded from current deliberative models: greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling.[21] Each of these modes of communication can be accommodated within argumentation and contribute towards the process of reaching understanding.

The public sphere conception does not categorically exclude aesthetic-affective forms of discourse. However, Habermas is right to be wary of *certain* manifestations of aesthetic-affective communication. Just as we must not separate aesthetics and emotion from discourse, so too we should not uncritically embrace all forms of aesthetic and emotive expression.[22] A distinction can be made between forms of discourse that contribute to greater understanding and those that are coercive. Rorty, amongst other postmodernists, opposes such a distinction. For discourse to be more inclusive of difference, Rorty (1997:18) suggests a 'blurring of the line between rhetorical manipulation and genuine validity-seeking argument.' He argues that if we think of reason 'simply as the process of reaching agreement by persuasion', rather than as 'a source of authority', then the 'standard Platonic and Kantian dichotomy of reason and feeling begins to fade away.' But this blurring can only be taken so far. Recent history clearly demonstrates how rhetoric can be used to dominate and exclude. Some sort of line must be drawn between rhetorical manipulation and persuasion in order to maximize difference. This is what the public sphere conception does. It judges in favour of forms of discourse, whether abstract logic or passionate storytelling, *to the extent* that they enhance democratic participation aimed at reaching understanding. The criteria of ideal role taking, sincerity, equality, and non-coercion function to exclude coercive forms of discourse such as propaganda, bribery, and physical and psychological violence that undermine rational democratic deliberation.

This differentiation of coercion and persuasion leads some critics, particularly those influenced by Foucault's analysis of power, to argue that Habermas attempts to inoculate the public sphere from power and thus naïvely conceives the operation of power as negative and transparent (Rasmussen, 1990:51-54; Best, 1995:194). Poststructuralism in general, and

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[21] Despite his seeming opposition to the aesthetic-affective modes of expression, Habermas utilizes such styles in his own political arguments. For instance, Best and Kellner (1991:250) observe that Habermas' *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* 'employs literary construction, copious rhetoric, and frequent moral and political passion.'

[22] Some postmodern political and cultural theorists seem to celebrate and promote difference in and of itself, without limit. Other postmodern theorists, such as Mouffe (1996:246), accept that in order to maximize inclusion we may need to restrict some voices and modes of expression.

Foucault in particular, have argued that power does not escape discourse and that it acts positively as well as negatively.

I believe this critique is largely based upon a poor characterization of Habermas' position. Habermas does not define power as simply negative and therefore needing to be summarily removed from the public sphere. The conception allows us to differentiate between forms of power rather than exclude all power. As postmodern critic Villa (1992:714) argues, Habermas cannot 'be accused of holding a "sovereign model" of power. . . . [He] points to the possibility of a positive – as opposed to a merely negative or repressive – power, a power that arises from communicative interaction.' The model of communicative action points to a model of '*political* power – the power to act together, to act in concert' (ibid:713). Communicative action involves power: actors using words to do things (especially persuade), and make things happen through the 'force of better argument.'[23] The power that is to be excluded from discourse in the public sphere is the *side of power* that limits and disables democratic participation and leads to communicative inequalities. These forms of power include the internal and external coercion discussed in Section 2.5.2. Instrumental and strategic rationality must be excluded from the public sphere as well as forms of domination resulting from the maldistribution of material and authoritative resources that lead to discursive inequalities.[24]

A second reason why the public sphere conception is adequate with respect to contemporary understandings of the operation of power is that it provides a counterfactual standard rather than a representation of the operation of discourse under present conditions. Habermas is more than aware of the fact that, as Fraser (1992:225) and Young (1996:123-124) remind us, coercive forms of power and domination cannot be completely separated from the public sphere. Assuming that power can be absented from certain, in this case deliberative, arenas

[23] It is interesting that critics of Habermas' theory of communicative rationality disagree over whether he has overestimated or underestimated power within discourse. While many see communicative action as underestimating the pervasiveness of power, Lash (1994:150) believes that, in fact, it over-emphasizes power: 'it claims to see power in places where power just isn't.' It seems that the disagreement here partly comes down to the fact that Habermas uses power in more than one sense. On the one hand, there is the more limited notion of administrative power, and on the other, the more expansive idea of power as persuasion within discourse. Similarly, critics disagree about whether Habermas overestimates or underestimates the contestatory nature of democratic discourse. While Flax (1992) and Mouffe (1993, 2000) call for more emphasis upon the agonistic of politics, Young (1996) sees deliberative democracy as already too conflictual. A deliberative democratic model contains both the contestation of positions and the search for mutual understanding through this contestation: the two are brought together via the normative conception of the public sphere.

[24] This is not to deny the enabling power of strategic and instrumental action when in their proper place.

will only reinforce present inequalities. Habermas (1996:325, 375-376) accepts that inequalities of power persist in the public sphere, including those due to social inequality, and that such inequalities must be brought into the open.[25] However, this does not mean that it is fruitless attempting to reduce the influence of inequalities in power. Indeed, this is precisely what a democratic politics must do. The public sphere conception sets a standard, based upon possibilities inherent in communication, for us to work towards. Chambers (1996:8) puts this nicely:

> Criticism requires a normative backdrop against which we criticize. Criticizing the ways power and domination play themselves out in discourse presupposes a conception of discourse in which there is no power and domination. In other words, to defend the position that there is a meaningful difference between talking and fighting, persuasion and coercion, and by extension, reason and power involves beginning with idealizations. That is, it involves drawing a picture of undominated discourse.

Finally, the public sphere conception is in tune with contemporary understandings of power in that it does not assume that subjects can always clearly distinguish between persuasion and coercion, good and bad forms of communication. This answers those critics who, as outlined above, associate Habermas' theory of discourse with the metaphysics of presence. In contrast to the metaphysics of presence, the attempt to differentiate domination from persuasion in the public sphere does not assume a naïve theory of the transparency of power and of meaning generally, where subjects can clearly distinguish coercion from persuasion, good from bad reasons, true from untrue claims, and so forth. The charge that communicative rationality contains hidden assumptions of transparency is based upon a poor interpretation of the notion of 'coming to understanding.' Coming to understanding does not assume knowing subjects who can fully identify truth and power. If that *were* the case, the exacting and uncertain process of coming to understanding intersubjectively would not be necessary. The very likelihood of *mis*understandings requires that those involved in discourse attempt to be as clear as possible about what they are saying and sincere about their interests and motives, as far as is possible given the continuous overflow of meaning.[26] Moreover, communicative rationality is premised on the very fact that participants require

[25] See Appendix Two for a discussion of the problem that social inequality poses for the public sphere conception and the need to thematize these inequalities.

[26] Cooke (1994:45-49) offers an excellent outline of the transparency debate as it relates to communicative rationality.

the inter-subjective process of deliberation in order to become more aware (relative to their pre-discursive state) of what is rational and non-coercive.

In this section I have shown that the public sphere conception of Figure 2.2 does make room for aesthetic-affective modes of discourse. At the same time, I have defended the necessity of excluding certain forms of discourse that obstruct rational deliberation. This does not mean a naïve theory of the transparency of power and meaning, but it does imply that interlocutors must aim to identify and exclude forms of discourse that undermine inclusion and equality. In the following section, I will reflect upon charges that the conception is inapplicable for the analysis of cyber-communications.

3.4 The Public Sphere Conception Confronts Hyperreal Cyberspace

New information and communications systems are often seen as an important element behind the emergence of a postmodern culture.[27] The Internet has become central to such arguments. According to Nguyen and Alexander (1996:120), 'there is a basic conflict between the coming society of which the Internet is the leading edge and the democratic institutions we inherited from the industrial revolution.' The changes to communications effected by the Internet and associated cyber-communications are seen as so radical that modernist forms of democratic interaction, including the public sphere, have become 'outmoded.' Cyberspace offers qualitatively different communicative practices from those represented by the public sphere conception, meaning that the latter does not provide a feasible vision for electronic democracy and so fails as a critical norm for the evaluation of contemporary cyber-democratic practices.

It is necessary to reply convincingly to these 'postmodern' claims if the public sphere conception is to be used successfully to evaluate online interaction. I will approach this task first by outlining the reasons why cyberspace is seen as a postmodern phenomenon. Mark Poster has become a central representative of this position and my exposition will draw largely upon his work. I will then explain why this postmodern phenomenon is believed to undermine the viability of the public sphere conception. Finally, I will examine the cogency of these claims through a general examination of cyber-culture as it relates to the public sphere conception. As such, this section is not only a reply to certain postmodern critics, but also offers a general introduction to the examination of cyber-culture that will be more fully

[27] See, for instance, Lyotard (1984:3-6) and Poster (1995:23-24).

developed in Chapter Six. However, my purpose here is not to provide an evaluation of the general research question about the possibility of cyber-interactions enhancing the public sphere. This will be tackled in Chapters Four to Seven. Here my task is simply to ask whether the public sphere conception is feasible within cyberspace.

3.4.1 The Media and Hyperreality

Developing his position that technologies are 'extensions of man [sic]', McLuhan (1973) argues that the importance of communications media is not the messages they carry, but the way the *form* of the medium impacts upon the scale, structure, and pattern of human experience. The

> conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot . . . . The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance. (McLuhan, 1973:26-27)

McLuhan argues that a shift from mechanical to electric forms of media has caused a fundamental social and psychic transformation (Smart, 1992:115-116). Mechanical print media wrought a world in which rationality was equated with the visual, sequential, uniform, continuous, and linear. In contrast, electric technologies have extended our 'central nervous systems in a global embrace, abolishing space and time as far as our planet is concerned' (McLuhan, 1973:11). This radical shift in human perception has put into question everything that was understood as rational in the mechanical age. In this 'electric age of instant and non-visual forms of interrelation . . . [we are] at a loss to define the "rational"' (McLuhan, 1973:129).

Baudrillard extends this emphasis on the destabilizing effect of the medium's 'form' on our understanding of the world by explaining it as part of a general historical process of the increasing simulation of culture towards hyperreality. Baudrillard (1993a) describes hyperreality as a state in which simulations of the real proliferate to the extent that the referent is lost in simulacra. Any distinction between real and unreal becomes blurred.

> The very definition of the real has become: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction . . . . The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: that is, the hyperreal . . . which is entirely in simulation. (ibid)

A general 'postmodern condition' is induced as the real/unreal implodes along with the associated binaries of truth/fiction, rational/irrational, reason/desire, mind/body, human/non-human, public/private, subject/object, and so on. These implosions destroy any modernist sense of the self as a unitary and rational subject enjoying an Archimedean perspective by which to fully know self, others, and the world.[28]

Baudrillard sees the simulation effected by the electronic media – the endless generation and transmission of information – as contributing substantially to the implosion of binaries and the death of the modernist subject. The media proliferate self-referential simulations. Information finally refers only to other information, inducing a state of hyperreality in which meaning becomes indistinguishable from noise, reality from fiction, and message from the medium itself. Baudrillard (1983b:101) takes McLuhan's theorem to its 'extreme limits.' As the medium saturates all of life with mediated reality, the medium itself becomes just as real, or more so, than the 'real' – a hyperreality. This signifies not only the end of the possibility of transforming the real by manipulating the message, but also the end of the revolutionary and subversive utilization of the medium.

> In short, the medium is the message signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no longer media in the literal sense of the term (I am talking above all about the electronic mass media) – that is to say, a power mediating between one reality and another – neither in content nor in form. . . . It is useless to dream of a revolution through content or through form, since the medium and the real are now in a single nebulous state whose truth is undecipherable. (Baudrillard, 1983b:102-103)

Communication now exhibits a state of hyperreality. A 'gigantic process of simulation', an 'exacerbated staging of communication', a fusing of 'propaganda and advertising' stand in the place of the radical loss of meaning, the subject, and the social. The public is simulated in the digital 'yes' or 'no' of perpetual 'scientific' opinion polling, a statistical referent sorted in databases and continually (re)produced by the mass media as medium and message at

[28] The modern subject is often seen by postmodernists as being invoked in such disparate currents of Western philosophy as liberal humanism, German Idealism, and Marxism. However, its reference is specifically to the 'I', or 'mind', or 'consciousness' of Descarte's *cogito* which guarantees all knowledge through reason. Baudrillard's thesis of the general destabilization of this subject in hyperreality extends the poststructuralist decentring of the subject from its privileged place within Western metaphysics. Derrida's (1974) poststructuralist analysis of language, Lacan's (1977) linguistically structured unconscious, Althusser's (1985) theory of ideology, and Foucault's (1980) analysis of power within discourse, all dispel the idea that the subject can be an autonomous author of

once (Baudrillard, 1983a:124-127). Rational judgment is not possible in this state of hyperreality. 'Silence', 'indifference', 'refusal of meaning', or 'non-reception' are the best, and only, strategies of resistance to the proliferation of messages and exhortation to be better informed (Baudrillard, 1983b:14, 22, 108). Here, the optimism of McLuhan's 'global village' is replaced by a hyperreality emptied of social and political possibilities. With simulation 'the political sphere becomes empty' (Baudrillard, 1983a:128).

3.4.2 Cyberspace as Hyperreality: Destabilization of the Subject and Postmodern Politics

Mark Poster (1997), along with many other postmodern cyber-theorists, sees the Internet as inducing a state of hyperreality.[29] He argues that cyberspace extends the disruption of modernist boundaries that McLuhan and Baudrillard have described. Subjectivity in particular, because it is constituted via discourse, is radically altered by shifts in the form of communications. The resulting decentring of subjectivity, Poster argues, means that a public sphere conception based upon rational deliberation loses its normative purchase within cyberspace. It is imperative that I now fully investigate the cogency of this argument because, if it is true, I will be forced to abandon my whole project.

Like McLuhan, Poster periodizes cultural and psychic shifts by reference to changes in communications technology. However, Poster (1990:14-15) goes further than McLuhan, arguing that it 'is not simply the sensory apparatus but the very shape of subjectivity' that is affected. He sees changes in forms of symbolic exchange as leading to three different stages in the 'mode of information' each of which constitutes the subject in different ways:

> In the first, oral, stage the self is constituted as a position of enunciation through its embeddedness in a totality of face-to-face relations. In the second, print, stage the self is constructed as an agent centred in rational/imaginary autonomy. In the third, electronic, stage the self is decentred, dispersed and multiplied in continuous instability. (Poster, 1990:6)

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meaning who utilizes language as merely a transparent conduit. Instead, subjectivity is seen as radically situated, fragmented, and multiplied at the intersection of unstable webs of meaning.

[29] A decade ago, theorists pronouncing the hyperreal state of cyberspace tended to refer to virtual reality technologies in general. See, for instance, Benedikt (1991), Heim (1991), Stenger (1991), and Stone (1992). More recently, theorists arguing that cyberspace induces a state of hyperreality have largely referred to the Internet specifically. See, for instance, Buchanan (1997), Kroker and Weinstein (1994), Nguyen and Alexander (1996), Slouka (1995), and Waskul and Douglass (1997).

Elaborating on this further, Poster (1995:58) argues that 'print culture constitutes the individual as a subject, as transcendent to objects, as stable and fixed in identity, in short, as a grounded essence.' In contrast, with electronic media we are confronted 'by a generalized destabilization of the subject.'

While Baudrillard totalizes a general state of hyperreality through the electronic media, Poster (1995:18-19) divides the third stage of the mode of information into two 'media ages.' He sees the hyperreal as being most evident in bi-directional, decentralized communication technologies. These 'second media age' technologies, exemplified by the Internet, produce qualitatively different possibilities than those of the 'first media age' (broadcast media) from which Baudrillard extrapolates. The Internet has the ability to institute 'costless reproduction, instantaneous dissemination and radical decentralization' (Poster, 1997:205). As such, it leads to the boundary implosions and destabilization of subjectivity described above. Two interlinked processes are seen as contributing to this general implosion.

i. Dislocation and disembodiment of subjects due to the disintegration of perceptions of space and time.

ii. Fragmentation of subjectivity due to its proliferation and dispersal through simulation.

Cyberspace is seen to effect a disintegration of modernist perceptions of time and space. Time frames are radically relativized by the speed of digital transmission. 'If there is something that computers have forced into our society, it is a different sense of time' (Stenger, 1991:55). With the disintegration of time frames, perceptions of distance, geography, and space, are radically altered. It is not just that barriers of distance are reduced. One's sense of space in general becomes radically distorted as conceptions of place and time are reconfigured since communication in cyberspace is at once close and distant. Waskul and Douglass (1997) refer to the *distantly intimate* interactions of a 'spaceless place.' Where is this place located? On the one hand, cyberspace is seen as geographically unlocated, deterritorialized, a non-place. On the other hand, given global digital dispersion, cyberspace is everywhere. When we are in cyberspace '[w]e are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere' (Buchanan, 1997:423). 'Where is cyberspace', Stenger (1991:53) asks? Cyberspace, she answers, 'is like OZ - it is, we get there, but it has no location. . . . [T]here will be a shifting from the sense of territory, of being an inhabitant of an earthly system of values that includes roots, walls, and possessions, toward a radical adventure that blasts it all.' Descriptions of cyberspace offered by Benedikt (1991:1-3) reinforce Stenger's description of a radical reality shift. Cyberspace is, according to Benedikt, '[a] new

universe, a parallel universe . . . . a virtual world. Everywhere and nowhere . . . . Recognizable and unrecognizable at once . . . . taking no space. . . . free of the bounds of physical space and time.'[30]

We can conclude that 'Internet technology imposes a dematerialization of communication. . . . [which] installs a new regime of relations between humans and matter' (Poster, 1997:205).[31] Spatially dislocated, subjects are at a loss to explain reality. A collapse of the modernist framework of reality results.

Claims of the detachment or dislocation of the subject from conventional space-time frames link to claims about the disembodiment or dematerialization of selves in cyberspace.[32] Waskul and Douglas (1997:392) argue that online interaction involves 'the dislocation of the physical body from the context of interaction' and that it 'is a uniquely disembodied experience.' Heim (1991:73) writes that '[c]yberspace supplants physical space. We see this happening already in the familiar cyberspace of on-line communication—telephone, e-mail, newsgroups, etc. When online, we break free, like the monads, from bodily existence.' Stenger (1991:53) similarly celebrates cyber-disembodiment, declaring that '[e]ntering this [cyberspace] realm of pure feelings is a decision to leave firm ground that may have more consequences than we think. Watching TV, after all, only commits us to being obese. In cyberspace we lose weight immediately.' Poster (1990:15-16) also asserts the link between dislocation and disembodiment in cyberspaces.

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[30] This disruption of space-time frames is what Nguyen and Alexander (1996) see as a move to 'cyberspacetime.' Following McLuhan, Nguyen and Alexander (1996:107) write that cyberspace is 'disordering our primordial frame of reference - human subjectivity within spacetime.'

[31] Nguyen and Alexander (1996:113) argue that '[w]e need to re-question the uniqueness of that which is human, and to redefine differences between human and animal, human and machine. This is, in a sense, the age-old investigation into the nature of mind and body, reason and intelligence.' A number of theorists of cyberspace as hyperreality have begun to do just this. They are rethinking the relationship between human and machine and developing post-humanist concepts in order to understand computer networking. Bukatman (1993), Guattari (1992), Harraway (1991), and Stone (1991) have each developed concepts or metaphors ('cyborg', 'assemblages', 'virtual systems', and 'terminal identity', respectively) that may be used to describe the imbrication of human and machine. Poster (1995:19) believes that such concepts better recognize the implosion of the subject/object binary in the second media age of hyperreality.

[32] The notion of disembodiment is popular amongst Internet enthusiasts, particularly cyber-libertarians who celebrate the escape of the mind from the restrictions of nation-state jurisdictions. The rhetoric links back into a Cartesian assumption of bodily transcendence. Cyberspace allows an individualized exchange of minds, representing reason's victory over bodily imperfection. In its crudest form this rhetoric refers to a mind/meat dualism, where 'meat' is a vulgar term for the body that is drawn from cyberpunk fiction. Poster and other postmodernists stand in a contradictory position in relation to this dualism. On the one hand they argue than an implosion of mind/body and transcendent/immanence takes place in cyberspace. On the other hand they speak of a dispersion, de-materialization, and abstraction of subjectivity in cyberspace which seems to reassert a separation of mind from the body.

> In the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, we are being changed from "arborial" beings, rooted in time and space, to "rhizomic" nomads who daily wander at will (whose will remains a question) across the globe, and even beyond it through communications satellites, without necessarily moving our bodies at all.
>
> The body then is no longer an effective limit of the subject's position. Or perhaps it would be better to say that communications facilities extend the nervous system throughout the Earth to the point that it enwraps the planet in a noosphere, to use Teilhard de Chardin's term, of language. If I can speak directly or by electronic mail to a friend in Paris while sitting in California, if I can witness political and cultural events as they occur across the globe without leaving my home, if a database at a remote location contains my profile and informs government agencies which make decisions that affect my life without any knowledge on my part of these events, if I can shop in my home by using my TV or computer, then where am I and who am I? In these circumstances I cannot consider myself centered in my rational, autonomous subjectivity or bordered by a defined ego, but I am disrupted, subverted and dispersed across social space.

As Poster indicates, dislocation and disembodiment are believed to lead to a radical destabilization and decentring of the subject. He also points to a second process causing the decentring of the subject: multiplication and fragmentation. Digital simulation and the dispersal of selves undermine a uniform, continuous, and logical world in cyberspace, leading to a fragmented and thus destabilized subject. Identity, when constituted through electronic networks, is repeatedly reconfigured at different points in time and space, making it unstable, multiplied, and dispersed (Poster, 1995:59; 1990:15). While Poster (1990) talks of the 'mode of information' effecting fragmentation of subjectivity, Stone (1992:611) talks of 'the mode of computer nets' which 'evoke fragmentation and multiplicity as an integral part of social identity.' She sees multiple personality syndrome, which she reads surprisingly positively, as a 'preexisting example of such a social mode.' Stenger (1991:53) similarly envisions such fracturing or multiplication of one's identity in cyberspace as 'a springtime for schizophrenia.' Waskul and Douglas (1997:394) argue that the multiplication of identity is partly the result of identity play and the presentation of self ('virtually unlimited in form and content') which is encouraged by the dislocation and disembodiment of subjects as well as the anonymity of online interactions – the lifting of material constraints and bodily markers 'exposing the potential for hyperfluidity of self-enactment.' Rheingold's

(1993:147) synopsis is similar. He illustrates the dissolving boundaries of 'Real Life' (RL) identity in cyberspace via a description of Multi-User Domain (MUD) personas:

> I know a respectable computer scientist who spends hours as an imaginary ensign aboard a virtual starship full of other real people from around the world who pretend they are characters of a Star Trek adventure. I have three or four personae myself, in different virtual communities around the Net. I know a person who spends hours of his day as a fantasy character who resembles "a cross between Thorin Oakenshield and the Little Prince," and is an architect and educater and bit of a magician aboard an imaginary space colony: By day, David is an energy economist in Boulder, Colorado, father of three; at night, he's Spark of Cyberion City – a place where I'm known only as Pollenator.

Here we seem to have not only a multiplication of identity but a complete escape from RL bodily contexts and identities into a dematerialized, self-referential, world. Online identity simulations are simply models of other virtual, media generated identities. Waskul and Douglas (1997:391) firmly link online 'identity play' to the production of hyperreality:

> Parallel to the multiple and simultaneous channels of on line communication exist a multiplicity of cyberselves. Each cyberself is an anonymous set of meanings associated with a screen name that may be presented as virtually anything. Such interactions become a form of dramatic communication play—a hyperreal simulacra of communication and a simulacra of the self—all reflective of symbolic interaction situated *within* a technology of social saturation.

The two postmodern, hyperreal producing processes outlined here (dislocation-disembodiment and fragmentation-multiplication) lead to the radical destabilization, or decentring, of the subject of modern reason: 'the subject is no longer located in a point in absolute time/space, enjoying a physical, fixed vantage point from which rationally to calculate its options' (Poster, 1990:15). Parallelling Lyotard's 'postmodern condition' of knowledge, the sign is seen as being cut off from its referent, inducing a state in which claims to universal reason no longer make sense (Nguyen and Alexander, 1996:104). This destabilization of the real has drastic consequences for rational deliberation. Participants are unable to fully know and reflexively monitor themselves, the world, and others. They cannot identify and fully represent their motives and interests. They are unable to distinguish between good and bad reasoning. The 'force of better argument' becomes meaningless. The notions of inclusion and equality become difficult to apply to multiple and fluid identities.

Political identities become dislocated and disembodied. Given these facts, Poster (1997) argues, critical judgement of validity claims is disabled. Rational deliberative democracy becomes 'outmoded.' The public sphere conception, as both norm of judgement and vision for deliberative democrats, becomes redundant. We must look for emerging forms of politics and democracy arising in cyberspace.

Some theorists of this implosion thesis follow Baudrillard in seeing little hope for productive politics within the hyperreality of cyberspace. Nguyen and Alexander (1996:118), for instance, argue that '[w]hatever is political staunchly demands a recognition of boundaries. These involve the encircling walls of the polis, the segregation of governmental powers, and political sovereignty. Without boundaries, the political atrophies and becomes quietly obsolescent.' They believe that politics dissolves due to rapidly imploding boundaries, proliferating micro-differences and information glut.

> [T]he wildly proliferating fields of cyberspacetime are . . . profoundly apolitical. In cyberspacetime, the social realm is engulfing and overwhelming the political realm. The "social" is decomposing the body politic. Decay of politics is proceeding as quickly as the matrix is growing. (Nguyen and Alexander, 1996:109)

While Baudrillard's closest followers see silence as the only option available in hyperreal culture, Poster and other hyperrealists see new possibilities for postmodern politics and democracy emerging through the boundary implosions induced by cyberspace.[33] The implosion of the hierarchical binary chain rational/irrational, subject/object, and so on, is believed to undermine what Derrida (1974) calls the 'metaphysics of presence' which, as seen earlier, seeks identity through exclusion of the 'Other.' As such, cyberspace interactions can be read as a deconstructive politics, disrupting oppressive, hierarchical conceptions of subjecthood and rationality.

New practices of self, reason, and interaction emerge as hierarchical binaries are disrupted. In terms of democracy, this means that there is greater space for unheard voices and identities. The Internet, according to Poster (1997:204), fosters Laclau's conception of a postmodern or post-Marxist democracy which 'opens new positions of speech, empowering previously excluded groups and enabling new aspects of social life to become part of the

[33] There are also those, like Slouka (1995), who agree that cyberspace induces hyperreality, but see this as only leading to pathological consequences for human life. They encourage withdrawal from cyberspace back into 'real life', where the latter is largely equated with face-to-face relations not affected by reality implosion.

political process.'[34] The Internet, Poster (1995:38) argues, similarly enables Lyotard's 'pagan politics' in which 'little narratives' that embrace the heterogeneous proliferate against totalitarian metanarratives of modernity and the performativity principal of postmodern information society.[35] Cyber-political practices may be seen as 'pagan' because they flatten hierarchical territory, undermining the 'truth' of any one narrative. Rather than promoting metanarratives which claim universal truth, computer conferences, MUDs, and online chat enable the proliferation of localized stories based upon and legitimated via everyday experience, dreams, or even fantasies. The 'little narrative' of online interaction enables a pagan politics of disruption, invention, and the voicing of difference. The decentring of subjecthood in cyber-discourse leads to the subversion and (re)creation of fixed realities, including oppressive stereotypes and hierarchies of power.

The subcultural groups that coalesce from out of these interactions are not necessarily political or rational as traditionally defined. Electronic bulletin board interactions, for instance, represent raw unmediated popular culture, not refined public discourse or glossy mass media. Their content would be viewed as mundane, puerile, esoteric, and even offensive to traditional sensibilities (Rheingold, 1993:132). Interaction is very much entertainment oriented, including simulated sex and violence. As a result, the potential of these groups for enhancing democratic participation may seem dubious when compared to what is normally seen as rational public discourse. However, just as other binaries become meaningless in cyberspace, according to the postmodern argument, computer networking does not make any distinction between politics and entertainment. These subcultures are political and democratic in the sense of allowing people to get together to discuss common concerns, encouraging the development of minority interests, offering voice to discourses unheard outside cyberspace, enabling participants to experiment with new forms of governance, and allowing the development of alternative visions of reality. 'They are places not of the presence of validity claims or the actuality of critical reason, but of the inscription of new assemblages of self-constitution' (Poster, 1997:213). This new cyber-politics offers

[34] See Laclau (1990).

[35] Lyotard (1984:46-47) argues that with the de-legitimation of metanarratives within postmodernity, knowledge has largely come to be legitimated by the principle of performativity. Truth is whatever provides the best results for the particular group concerned. Lyotard argues that without the metanarrative, the best alternative to performativity is pagan politics. Pagan politics draws upon 'the little narrative' for 'counter-examples' and 'paradoxes' to disrupt the 'terroristic' fixing of meaning that results from both metanarratives and performativity criteria. Both the performativity principle and pagan politics are associated with the information society. Performativity is generally the driving force behind new technological developments and information flows. Pagan politics is also linked to the development of new communications technologies: the development of the little narrative results (partly) from the transformation of language which in turn is induced in part by new technologies of communication.

hope for democracy but not for the public sphere. The latter, being based upon rational deliberation, is outmoded in hyperreal cyberspace and must be rejected as a critical norm of democratic practice. I want to carefully evaluate this postmodern hyperrealist argument to see if indeed we must abandon the public sphere conception and the research project proposed here.

3.4.3 Evaluating the Postmodern Critique

Poster (1997:209) argues that online interaction cannot be understood via the concept of the public sphere.

> For Habermas, the public sphere is a homogeneous space of embodied subjects in symmetrical relations, pursuing consensus through the critique of arguments and the presentation of validity claims. This model, I contend, is systematically denied in the arenas of electronic politics. We are advised to abandon Habermas' concept of the public sphere in assessing the Internet as a political domain.

The central proposition of this postmodern argument is that Internet communication produces radically new social and psychic experiences that undermine the assumptions of reality upon which rational deliberation is based, making the public sphere empirically and normatively redundant. A radical destabilization or decentring of the modernist subject is believed to occur in cyberspace as subjectivity becomes detached from materially fixed, embodied contexts and is dispersed and multiplied continuously through digitization. Locally situated, linear, stable, consensus-seeking interaction between unitary, embodied, knowledgable actors is destabilized in cyberspace where non-located, open-ended, fleeting encounters occur between disembodied, fragmented, dislocated selves. Given such postmodern practices we must, according to Nguyen and Alexander (1996) question the adequacy of (modern) social science's conceptual apparatuses. It follows that critical theory needs to be reframed and new, more adequate postmodern analytical tools developed to deal with new postmodern phenomena.

To what extent, then, must the claim of the fragmentation and abstraction-disembodiment of the self in cyberspace be accepted? Is it indeed the case that the public sphere conception is made redundant by online culture? I will first consider the degree of abstraction from embodied contexts and then examine the claims for the fragmentation of the cyber-self. In each case, I will re-examine the public sphere conception to determine the extent that it can accommodate any hyperreal effects that do take place due to interactions in cyberspace. I want to show that, on the one hand, the claims of cyberspace inducing a state of hyperreality

are exaggerated, while on the other hand, the public sphere conception does in fact adequately cater for the forms of interaction and subjectivity that develop through online communication.

Abstraction of the self from material life has been particularly celebrated and promoted by many cyber-libertarians, virtual communitarians, and cyber-feminists, who desire escape from state and patriarchal controls (see Barlow, 1996; Plant, 1996). However, the material detachment and disembodiment of selves from everyday life through cyberspace has been overdrawn. Participants may certainly feel as if they are detached from offline contexts and relationships as they immerse themselves in 'life online' and play with the presentation of virtual selves. Yet, material detachment and disembodiment is an illusion. Cyber-interactions are very much integrated into offline material existence. One does not escape one's embodied social and psychic self in cyberspace. As Turkle's (1995) research has shown, online interactions draw from and have a very real impact upon one's social and psychological makeup.[36] Neither can one escape through cyberspace from the social, economic, and ethical-political obligations and restrictions of embodied social contexts and political jurisdictions, as those convicted of dealing in child pornography on the Internet find upon their physical incarceration.[37] Nor do many participants desire escape from so- called 'Real Life'.[38] Rather than escape, many participants utilize the Internet to extend their everyday worlds and identities. Internet communications are not so much a way to move into another reality as a way of linking up with others around the globe to share, gain support for, and develop very real everyday interests, values, and concerns (Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

[36] Turkle's research demonstrates how being online has various effects upon selfhood. It can be both beneficial and detrimental to social and psychological development. For instance, long periods of time in cyberspace has debilitated the ability of some people to hold meaningful relationships, while it has allowed others with poor social skills (including post-trauma patients) to (re)gain communicative competence for everyday relationships.

[37] The Internet does allow transformations in the relationships between citizens and the state, but there is little evidence that the citizen is able to fully escape legal restraints. Some Internet activities are presently not legislated for or easily controlled (see Section 5.4). However, a lag between law and new social phenomena can be expected. Laws and policing systems are already being developed to cover the 'holes' created by Internet activities. While the Internet offers participants new strategies for subversion and resistance, it also offers states new techniques of surveillance and control. This point is further developed in Chapter Five.

[38] As noted in Chapter One, I try to avoid using the binary opposition cyberspace/real life because I hold relations in cyberspace to be as 'real' as any other aspects of everyday life.

Moreover, anonymity and explicit identity play, which are linked to abstraction from offline identity, are not as pervasive as some commentators maintain. It is true that the Internet allows participants a greater degree of anonymity than other mediums, but this is not a necessary aspect of the medium. The Internet can also be used to reveal and even publicize identity (Donath, 1999:40-44). The majority of cyber-communications, especially via e-mail, e-mail lists, and the Web, are carried out between people who voluntarily reveal aspects of their offline identities as relevant to the particular interaction in which they are engaged in order to build meaningful relationships (Burkhalter, 1999:64). Even in some of the more 'playful' spaces, such as sexually-oriented Internet Relay Chat and MUDs, participants often try to identify the 'RL STATS' (personal details) of their interlocutors.[39] Where anonymity does play a part, it often encourages participants to express 'themselves' more openly than they would in offline situations (Danet, 1998:131). Furthermore, despite the lack of bodily markers, bodies are central to cyber-interactions (Argyle and Shields, 1996; Kendall, 1999; Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995). Not only are bodies always already present behind computer terminals but they are also implicitly and explicitly brought into online conversation through the use of descriptors of emotional states and bodily actions (Argyle and Shields, 1996:58). For example, participants may describe their bodily involvement in online interaction by typing such descriptors as <sigh>, <laugh>, <hug>, or they may provide icons to describe their emotions, such as :) for smile or :(for frown.

Cyber-interactions thus do not and cannot detach people from embodied offline contexts, contexts that include the necessity of confronting the political problems and responsibilities of embodied coexistence. Abstraction of self from 'reality' is an illusion and so cannot lead to a radical disruption of time-space orientation and the implosion of reality and selfhood. Nevertheless, Internet communication does have some effect on participants' sense of time and space. Cyberspace contributes to what Giddens (1990) refers to as 'time-space distanciation' and Harvey (1989) as 'time-space compression', where technological mediation has increasingly shrunk temporal and spacial boundaries and transformed inter-subjective communications into a highly mediated phenomenon. Given this effect, there is no place, as Poster (1997:209) points out, for a public sphere of entirely face-to-face relations. According to Poster, Habermas fails to account for this. Thompson (1995:261) and Calhoun (1992:33, n50) agree. They argue that Habermas' public sphere notion is modelled upon face-to-face conversation and publicness as co-presence. It assumes an unmediated exchange of reasons within a shared temporal-spacial locale. The public sphere

[39] Kendall's (1996a:217-218) study of identity of Multi-Object-Oriented online spaces shows that people are often pressed to reveal their offline gender.

privileges the immediacy of oral interactions over textually mediated interactions. It is therefore an unsuitable model for highly mediated communications such as online discourse. This challenge raises two questions. First, does the public sphere conception assume a naïve model of transparent communication, referred to by Poster (1997:210) as the 'fiction of the democratic community of full human presence'? Second, does the conception account for time-space distanciation and hence can it deal with highly mediated communication?

The answer to the first question is that Habermas does derive his model from speech act theory. However, this is certainly plausible since all forms of mediated communication are probably derivative of face-to-face communication. Moreover, Habermas does not posit face-to-face interactions as transparent. As explained in Section 3.3, the public sphere conception does not assume a naïve transparency model of communication. And, with respect to the second question, neither are face-to-face interactions demanded by the public sphere conception. Rather, as seen in the previous chapter, the spacial character of communicative rationality allows for remote and highly dispersed deliberations. Habermas (1992a:451) actually emphasizes that the public sphere must be conceived of as the result of amorphous, abstract, and mediated relations.

> If there still is to be a realistic application of the idea of the sovereignty of the people to highly complex societies, it must be uncoupled from the concrete understanding of its embodiment in physically present, participating, and jointly deciding members of a collectivity.

Even in STPS Habermas took the mediation of public interaction into account, acknowledging media (the political press and literary journals) as central to publicity, rational debate, and the development of public opinion. Habermas shows that mediation has occurred throughout modernity. In comparison, Poster's desire to historicize a modern face-to-face stage of discourse and a postmodern stage of highly mediated communication takes the risk of neglecting the way in which the early public sphere utilized communications media that distanciated space-time too. As Wayne Hope (1996a:77) states,

> Poster ignores the possibility that the disjuncture of space from place (cyberspace) is an extension of modernity. Even the early modern public sphere was operable without face-to-face dialogue and geographic meeting points. Now the media-IT revolution has simply extended the domains in which space is a placeless phenomena.

The public sphere conception does not privilege a face-to-face model of interaction. Although cyber-interactions do change the way people interact they do not 'outmode' the requirements listed in Figure 2.2, all of which can be fulfilled through dispersed cyber-interactions. In fact, the time-space compression caused by the Internet may enable increased deliberations and an enhanced public sphere. This is the question I will be investigating in the rest of this thesis.

The exaggerated claim to bodily abstraction links to the second aspect of cyberspace which is believed to contribute to the undermining of rational deliberation: the fragmentation of subjectivity as it is multiplied by databases, dispersed by computer messaging and conferencing, dissolved and materialized continuously in the electronic transmission of symbols (Poster, 1990:15). This fragmentation of identity through cyberspace has real substance. State and commercial surveillance is able to follow, transmit, and store in data banks, virtual identities that have very real effects on individuals. In addition, online identity play impacts upon participant's everyday lives. However, like the claims about the abstraction and disembodiment of selves, the fragmentation of subjectivity that is believed to result from online interaction is overdrawn. The changing, multiple, dispersed identities of cyberspace are neither as radically new nor as extensive and positive as is sometimes argued.

Living with multiple identities or subject positions is not new to media technologies nor to social life in general. Both Gergen (1991) and Goffman (1959, 1963), as Kendall (1999:61) notes, 'document numerous pre-Internet examples of this multiplicity of identity performance.' A stable universe or unified self has never actually existed, at least under modern conditions.[40] People have had to learn to live with multiple identities. In order to do so, they have to take on or perceive some degree of coherence and unity.[41] As Flax (1990:218) points out, a fragmented and unstable selfhood would quickly lead to psychosis. To stave off this state, a 'core self' is required to manage and integrate the various aspects of subjectivity. Flax (1990:218-219) explains that her work as a psychotherapist with people

[40] In comparison to the caricature of modernity by some postmodernists, Berman's (1983:15-17) analysis of modernity paints a picture of endemic social change, in which people experience the loss of the stabilizing effects of tradition and persistent uncertainty. A 'paradoxical unity' existed: a 'unity of disunity . . . [which] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish'. Hall (1992:282) argues that within this climate of 'metaphysical doubt and scepticism' the modernist subject could never have been as unified and coherent as is caricatured by some theorists, most particularly postmodernists.

[41] The idea that people understand themselves as coherent beings links to Habermas' conception of autonomy, where '[a]n autonomous self is self identical . . . in the reflexive sense that one can identify oneself as an individual who maintains a certain continuity in time and who is distinguished by a unique life history' (Warren, 1995:172-173). It is important to note that this autonomy is developed through intersubjectivity rather than from the discovery of a pre-discursive identity.

suffering from 'borderline syndrome' – an illness in which 'the self is in painful and disabling fragments' – shows that without a core self an individual finds it almost impossible to live in the 'outer world.' She argues that 'those who celebrate or call for a "de-centred" self seem self-deceptively naïve and unaware of the basic cohesion within themselves that makes the fragmentation of experiences something other than a terrifying slide into psychosis.' The state of being post-human, if it means a state of fragmentation, should be avoided as much as possible.

As is the case with life offline, the management of multiple and changing identities is an important aspect of being online. The multiple identities in cyberspace, whether chosen or imposed, are creatively negotiated by those individuals to whom they are attached. From her extensive research of mediated communications, Turkle (1997:1103-1105) argues that subjects in cyberspace see themselves as multiple and integrated at the same time. The comparison to multiple personality disorder (MPD) breaks down because healthy participants in cyberspace consciously adopt and negotiate between their online persona. Despite the flexibility of identity online, the sense of self-knowledge and agency involved is much stronger than that experienced by persons with MPD. People desire and learn how to maintain stable, integral identities. Kendall's (1999:62) research of online interaction on a MUD shows that 'people persist in seeking essentialized groundings' in cyberspace. They 'continually work to reincorporate their experiences of themselves and of other selves into integrated, consistent wholes.' Though the Internet offers great flexibility, the core business of the self remains.

The sense of autonomy and rationality is reinforced in cyberspace since, without it, people are not able to be active in the creation and interpretation of meaning. It is not, Poster (1997:211) observes, a pre-discursive rational self which is active here. Poster rejects the depiction of 'the Internet as the realization of the modern dream [of] universal, "active" speech' associated with 'the modern autonomous agent.' Such a position, he indicates, 'rests upon the notion of identity as a fixed essence, pre-social and pre-linguistic.' Instead, he emphasizes 'that Internet discourses constitute the subject as the subject fashions him or herself. On the Internet, individuals construct their identities in relation to ongoing dialogues, not as acts of pure consciousness.' It is through online interaction that individuals are able to reflect upon and actively participate in the constitution of their overlapping online and offline subject positions.

Despite denying the public sphere conception, Poster's discursively constituted yet creative cyber-subject is surprisingly parallel to the subject assumed by Habermas' discourse theory.

With communicative rationality, reason derives from inter-subjectivity, not from a fully rational, pre-discursive self. Subjects develop autonomy and reflexivity only through deliberation (Warren, 1995:172-174).[42] This understanding of the subject allows for two seemingly oppositional existential conditions to be accommodated: the ontological uncertainty of discursive constitution and the relative autonomy, coherence, and understanding resulting from social integration and self reflection.

In sum, then, communicative rationality is not outmoded by cyber-discourse. Argumentation, the reasoned exchange of validity claims, remains possible because cyber-interactions constitute individuals as autonomous, active, and reflexive, able to know themselves, to manage and integrate their multiple and changing identities. I do not want to deny the existence of radically hyperreal political practices in cyberspace which undermine present conceptual categories and reality itself, such as the post-human imbrication of humans with technology. But these are very much peripheral or emergent within cyber-culture.[43] Much of the talk of radical change is extrapolated from such marginal forms. Poster (1995:55, 76) admits that his claims are developed from trends and possibilities, although he 'anticipates a future in which these tendencies will no longer be emergent but dominant.' Stone (1992:610) sees her writing in a similar way, as 'about science fiction', 'emergent behaviour', and 'new social forms.' The tenacity of these new social forms remains in question for her. Benedict (1991:3) admits that the cyberspace he describes 'does not exist.' Emergent forms, often drawn from futurism and science fiction, may offer interesting and provocative insights into possible futures. However, my concern here is the sociological analysis of the contemporary Internet practices which, as I have clearly shown, do not undermine the normative validity of the public sphere conception.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have defended the public sphere conception outlined in Chapter Two (Figure 2.2) as a useful and relevant critical norm to evaluate online deliberation. There are three major critiques of the public sphere conception that I have had to confront. I first looked at

[42] Other definitions of the self offered by sophisticated deliberative democrats are consistent with Habermas' definition. Thompson (1995:210) sees the self as a project that the individual actively constructs within interaction, weaving the symbolic materials and experiences they encounter into a coherent account or narrative of self-identity. Similarly, Benhabib (1992:214) argues that selves are both authors and characters at once, discursively constituted yet able to critically reflect and act.

[43] Such forms may be thought of as an underground counter-culture. Much ink has been expended on this from the cyberpunk inspired by William Gibson's writings to popular commentary and cultural analysis – see, for instance, Dery (1996).

those postmodern critics who believe that we simply cannot develop universal normative conceptions from out of everyday practices. Against this, I argued that Habermas' theory of communicative action points to a universal yet post-metaphysical basis for communicative rationality and the public sphere. I did not attempt to finally secure the validity of this grounding via a re-examination of its derivation. Accepting the fallibility of the concept, I turned to more pragmatic questions about the public sphere's applicability as a critical conception of democratic politics in general and the evaluation of cyberspace interactions in particular.

The second critique considered the argument that the public sphere conception is inconsistent with the very deliberative ideals it is meant to stand for. More specifically, the public sphere conception is seen as prescribing a rationalistic form of discourse that downplays aesthetic-affective modes of discourse. Critics believe that this prescription leads to the exclusion of certain ways of speaking and associated cultural voices, an exclusion that contradicts the public sphere's demand for equality and inclusion within discourse. Critics argue that this neglect of aesthetic-affective forms of interaction also limits the resources for reaching understanding that are available within communication. In response, I argued that this reading is *not* necessitated by the public sphere conception posited in Figure 2.2. I showed that the conception does make room for aesthetic-affective elements, at least to the degree that such forms of discourse fulfil the demands of discursive equality and inclusion.

Finally, I considered the argument that the public sphere conception is outmoded in relation to the so-called hyperreal phenomenon of cyberspace. Poster, supported by other postmodern theorists, concludes that cyber-interaction induces a decentring of subjectivity and rationality to the point where the public sphere conception loses critical purchase in the analysis of Internet culture and politics. I have argued that Poster has actually misread the public sphere notion, seeing it as subject centred and assuming face-to-face interaction. The public sphere conception can fully take into account the subjectivity constituted and multiplied by cyber-discourse. Moreover, postmodern cyber-commentators like Poster tend to overextend the Internet's hyperreal impact. The Internet, along with other new media, does indeed precipitate major social and cultural changes, but these are not in the order of a Baudrillardian hyperreality as Poster and his postmodern friends believe. Despite identity simulation and time-space distanciation, interlocutors in cyberspace are able to undertake critical-reflexive deliberation. The public sphere being facilitated through the Internet remains a possibility, the actuality of which warrants our further attention.

Having confirmed the critical status of the public sphere conception, including its possibility within cyber-discourse, the remainder of this thesis looks at the extent to which the public sphere is *actually* being enhanced by online interaction, and how it can be more fully developed through the Internet. To do this I will undertake a comparison of online practices with the public sphere conception, contextualizing the evaluation within Habermas' system-lifeworld explanation of societal development.

Chapter 4 Methodological Considerations: Towards a Comprehensive Analysis of the Internet

4.1 Introduction

The conception of the public sphere outlined and defended in chapters Two and Three provides the critical criteria necessary for evaluating the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. I will now outline how this evaluation is to be actually undertaken. This means taking the discussion beyond the general conceptual issues to a focus on more concrete methodological considerations. I need to decide how to employ the public sphere conception in relation to the Internet, and in particular what methods are required for the collection and analysis of data.

This chapter sets the terms for an analysis of the Internet that is adequate to the critical evaluation required here. I begin by arguing that investigations of the Internet overlap with, and can effectively utilize, three prominent 'strands' of both media and technology research. Each strand emphasizes a different aspect of 'media-technology' systems: uses, technological form, and social structures. I consider the common pitfalls of each strand and argue for a more comprehensive research programme, one that utilizes a multiperspectival approach to take into account all three aspects of media-technology processes. I suggest that a useful way to develop such an approach, particularly given the focus here upon the public sphere, is provided by Habermas' system-lifeworld conception. This conception offers both a comprehensive methodological framework and a powerful critical orientation. In brief, Habermas' system-lifeworld theory contextualizes the research within an understanding of social dynamics which helps illuminate the possibility of the public sphere being extended through the Internet under present conditions. When taken together, the system-lifeworld and public sphere conceptions underpin my programme of research. On this basis, the chapter concludes by elaborating the actual methods needed to critically evaluate the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere.

4.2 Studying the Internet via Media-Technology Research Traditions

The question of how to study the Internet is attracting increasing attention from social scientists.[1] Researchers are beginning to reflect upon the adequacy of existing methods for Internet analysis.[2] Some, like Mark Poster, are even arguing that the Internet so radically changes our sense of reality that whole new concepts and investigative procedures need to be developed. However, as I have argued in Chapter Three, this is not the case. The continuities between the Internet and other media-technologies are such that many of the concepts and methods presently used to analyse other communications systems may still be adequately, if reflexively, applied. The question is not how to develop totally new approaches but rather how to best utilize and develop the concepts and methods we already have available.

The Internet is a broad and complex phenomenon constituted by a vast array of industries and infrastructures, hardware and software, programmers and users. Internet research reflects this diversity with research projects being undertaken from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives that draw upon many empirical methods such as textual analysis, ethnography, social network analysis, statistical modelling, and so on. However, individual research projects tend to be limited to the particular models and methods familiar to the researchers involved. What results is an array of research projects that give limited perspectives on the particular problems addressed. Although such projects are often brought together through edited volumes that attempt to be interdisciplinary (for example, Shields, 1996; Jones, 1997; Loader, 1997), there is little in the way of the systematic and multi-perspectival research that is needed to adequately account for the Internet's complexity.[3] An adequate analysis of the question of whether the Internet can enhance the public sphere requires such an account. It demands a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of the Internet. To develop such an account, I believe that we can critically draw together the main media-technology approaches that Internet research has to date been utilizing in a piecemeal fashion.

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[1] One of the first books dedicated to the question of undertaking Internet research is Jones (1999a). Possibly the first international conference wholly dedicated to the question was *Internet Research 1.0: The State of the Interdiscipline,* First Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA (Sept, 2000) http://www.cddc.vt.edu/aoir/ (last accessed 1/9/00).

[2] See, for instance, Jones (1999b) and Hine (1998).

[3] The Virtual Society research programme, taken as a whole, is a notable exception. See http://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/virtsoc/intro.htm (last accessed 2/3/00).

The limited perspectives of individual Internet research efforts reflect three strands within both media and technology studies. Each strand emphasizes different aspects or determinations of the problem at hand and utilizes different methods. As has been widely argued, media studies has bifurcated into culturalist and structuralist approaches.[4] It is divided between those who concentrate upon an analysis of meanings developed at the level of cultural artefacts and those who offer a broader sociological analysis of media institutions and their products. The culturalist tradition is itself divided into those who look to meanings within texts and those who emphasize the readings of texts as constituting meaning (Golding and Murdock, 1991:94). These three strands of critical media studies (readings, texts, contexts) are paralleled in the approaches to the study of technology.[5] Researchers tend to emphasize one central determining or causal aspect in the study of technology. They either emphasize technological uses (paralleling readings of texts), the effects of the technological artefact (paralleling the constitutive power of texts), or the impact of social structures (paralleling social production and the larger context of texts). In what follows, I will critically assess each of the strands in turn, drawing upon media-technology approaches spanning from the Frankfurt School and McLuhan to theorists of the Internet, indicating the pitfalls that each can fall into. This assessment will help to indicate a methodological approach that is adequate to the task of comprehensively evaluating the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere.

4.2.1 Uses

Much Internet research focuses upon the ways in which individuals and groups use the new medium. More specifically, a significant amount of the research that looks at the relationship between the Internet and politics focuses upon how people employ (and adapt) the Internet to their political ends.[6] This 'uses' emphasis is not new. It links to a well-developed research strand in both media and technology studies.

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[4] On the bifurcation in the history of critical media studies, see Curran (1990), Golding and Murdock (1991), Kellner (1997a), and Morely (1989, 1992).

[5] For background to the various traditions in the social study of technology, see Carpenter (1992) and Lacroix and Tremblay (1997).

[6] See for instance Bimber (1998), Harrison and Stephen (1999), Hill and Hughes (1998), Katz (1997b), Koen (1996), Mele (1999), and Yates and Perrone (1998). Bimber heads the Government and Politics on the Net Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which carries out mostly quantitative research on the use of the Internet in political organization and participation. Harrison and Stephen (1999) introduce many other researchers, promoters, and practitioners who emphasize the crucial role of individuals in developing successful online community-democracy projects.

Cultural studies, developing from North American communications research and British media studies, has responded to the Frankfurt School emphasis upon the domination of 'the culture industry' with a turn towards a more expansive conception of the uses (or readings) of the media. Whereas the Frankfurt School left us with a passive mass audience, cultural studies has placed human actors back into the equation. In Britain, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies maintained a critical perspective while overcoming much of the Frankfurt School's high culture bias, emphasizing instead the possibilities of oppositional politics within 'popular culture' (Kellner, 1997a). Audience reception studies have further developed this focus upon the active role of media users. Fiske (1987), for example, stresses that media texts are open to a range of different interpretations. For Fiske, this 'polysemy' implies that the reader holds the key to meaning: a 'work', following Barthe's distinction, becomes a 'text' only upon its reading (Morley, 1989:21). Such celebrations of the autonomy and cultural power of readership has been particularly strong in the North American inflection of audience research (Morley, 1996:286). This is not surprising given that American communications studies has been strongly influenced by the liberal pluralist 'uses and gratification' model that developed in response to 'effects' traditions (Morley, 1989).[7]

Technology studies has extended 'uses and gratifications theory to the issue of new technologies' (Lacroix and Tremblay, 1997:85).[8] A technological artefact is seen as a transparent, *neutral* tool able to satisfy the purposes of the agents employing it. The artefact has no 'intentions' of its own, it is simply a 'formal' device that extends the capacities of its users in the same way in any socio-political setting (Trend, 1997:105). As Welchman (1997:155) puts it, 'technology itself has no effects, it's all a matter of how it is used.' Any 'effects' are fully controllable through both the use and the design of the artefact. We can choose what technology comes into existence and how it will be applied.

The uses tradition of media research provides a necessary emphasis upon the way actors purposefully design, employ, and appropriate information and communications technologies for themselves. However, this emphasis can lead to a number of pitfalls if taken too far or in singular fashion.

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[7] See Halloran (1970) for more on the uses and gratifications tradition.

[8] Garramone, Harris, and Pizante's (1986) and Garramone, Harris, and Anderson's (1986) quantitative studies of motivations in the use of political BBS offer classic examples of the extension of the 'uses and gratifications' tradition to computer-mediated communications research.

The idea of media-technology as a neutral tool tends to assume a technical fix scenario, where machines of various kinds can always be developed and used to solve social and political problems. Tied to this is the idea that media-technology is a discrete and autonomous entity, abstracted from the wider social context. It has a 'thingness' quality. Media-technologies are external to both the subjects using them and to the world upon which they are applied. This argument is often ahistorical, presenting media-technologies as given, as somehow existing without social origin or context. Electronic democracy proponents, as Street (1997:34) points out, often make such technical fix assumptions. They see the Internet as the latest and best media-technology by which to solve the present problems facing democracy.

Such views of media-technology draw upon an instrumentalist understanding of the human agent (Carpenter, 1992:166). They assume an abstract, coherent, purposive subject manipulating objects at will, with 'uses and users as the causal agents in the production of social action' (Lacroix and Tremblay, 1997:85). This methodological individualism is readily subsumed within ideologies that celebrate an untrammelled consumer sovereignty (Golding and Murdock, 1991:16; Lacroix and Tremblay, 1997:85; Morley, 1996:286-287). This is particularly true, as seen in Chapter One, for electronic democrats who subscribe to the liberal individualist camp.

As Kellner (1997b) exhorts, we must not deny the possibility and indeed importance of using and controlling media technology for democratic ends. However, it is dangerous to assume that individual actors are in total control of media-technologies. Such an assumption overlooks the structuring of actions by technological systems. Furthermore, it neglects the socio-cultural embeddedness of these systems and their users. I will now examine research strands that focus on these two concerns in order to develop a more balanced approach to Internet research.

4.2.2 Effects

There is considerable scholarly interest in the way the technological 'form' of the Internet structures socio-cultural outcomes and effects uses and agents.[9] In terms of online deliberation, attention is paid to the Internet's impact upon political behaviour: the way in which certain communication patterns are encouraged by the Internet that either enhance or retard democratic talk. For instance, in his Doctoral research on the flows of online political information, Bonchek (1997) argues that the 'Internet's unique properties as a

communication medium are altering the ways that political agents communicate with one another and creating a new structure of political communication.' The two-way, many-to-many, interactive communication of the Internet, Bonchek argues, offers a 'structure in which all agents are connected directly and interactively with each other', overcoming the limitations of information transmission associated with one-to-one communication and bypassing the gatekeeping of broadcast media.

Such emphasis upon the effects of the Internet is strongly adopted by many media-technology researchers influenced by postmodern ideas. Poster (1997:206) admits that in some respects the Internet can be conceived as a tool (for example, for transmitting e-mail messages). However, the Internet is more socially significant, according to Poster, in that it 'instantiate[s] new forms of interaction' and 'new kinds of relations of power between participants.' Other postmodern theorists agree. Nguyen and Alexander (1996:113) write that the Internet is a 'constructive' medium, producing new realities as 'electronic pulses permeate our daily lives.' Likewise, Stone (1995:167) believes that 'the Internet, cyberspace, and virtual reality . . . are parts of our very selves . . . they are languages . . . what they do is structure seeing. They act on the systems – social, cultural, neurological – by which we make meanings.' Kroker (1992:2) theorizes 'technology as cynical power . . . technological society is described under the sign of possessed individualism: an invasive power where life is enfolded within the dynamic technological language of virtual reality . . . . Indeed, virtual reality – the world of digital dreams come alive – is what the possessed individual is possessed by.'

Such arguments draw upon an 'effects' research tradition within both media and technology studies. The Frankfurt School analysis of the pervasive effects of the mass media has been very influential. In its strongest formulations, the cultural products of the mass media are basically agents of socialization and political indoctrination. Poststructuralism, with its focus upon language and discourse, has also provided impetus to the analysis of the cultural impact of media-technology texts as constitutive of meaning. This emphasis is extended by the likes of Baudrillard and postmodern media theorists who see the medium itself, and not just the content, as having socio-cultural 'effects.' The medium is investigated as a text inscribing meaning and so structuring social relations, including those of subjective identity.

This tradition in media studies corresponds to the 'social impact' of technology literature which emphasizes the transformations 'caused' by technologies acting on society. As Carey

[9] See, for instance, the research of Kolb (1996) and Sproull and Kiesler (1991, 1994) into the way the computer-mediated communication structures use.

(1992:8) states, parallelling McLuhan, 'technology is not only artefact but actor . . . it is machines that have teleological insight.' A similar style of argument is apparent in the Frankfurt School's pessimism about the colonizing spread of instrumental rationality through, amongst other things, technological systems (Marcuse, 1941; Habermas, 1970). Theorists of post-industrial and postmodern society also tend to see technology as a casual agent, the driving force behind social change. For Daniel Bell (1973) technology is the axial or organizing principle of this social transformation. Similarly, Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1983b) argue that technology is a central agent in the development of the postmodern condition.

This 'effects' approach further recognises that even in their design and development media-technologies are not under the complete control of social subjects. The Internet is a perfect example of this. Although designed by military scientists, the Internet was

> not created by a sheer act of will . . . . technical change has a momentum which is often independent of those who appear to control it. They [the military scientists] are as often forced to cope with the many unanticipated consequences of technical change as they are able to plan that change. (Street, 1997:34)

An emphasis upon the social impact of technology must be part of any communications research. However, such an emphasis can have its pitfalls if developed without reference to uses or other social determinants. Of course, the enormous impact of media-technologies on modern life, including their numerous unanticipated consequences, should not be underestimated. More and more areas of life are encompassed by media-technologies. They increasingly shape the way we think and the choices we make. Nevertheless, this impact is not as independent of human control as some utopian and dystopian theorists tend to indicate.[10] Such accounts reify media-technology as an autonomous causal actor, proceeding as if it acted on social life from above with its own independent logic and momentum. As with one-sided uses arguments, media-technology in such strong determinist arguments assumes the form of a discreet entity, autonomous from individual or social control. Once again, it becomes 'a tangible determinate entity - a kind of thing' (Marx, 1997:981).

[10] Technologically utopian or technophilic commentators include Gates (1995, 1999), Pool (1990), and Toffler and Toffler (1994). Technologically dystopian or technophobic commentators include Ellul (1964) and Postman (1992).

More plausible theories emphasize the way media-technologies are integrated into social life, socially shaped as well as shaping. For the techno-determinist, however, the properties of a particular technology predetermine social developments.[11] Refusing to adopt the latest media-technology will lead nations, organizations, and individuals, to social and economic backwardness.[12] We must simply accept and adapt to the inevitable social transformations wrought by media-technologies such as the Internet. Such claims indicate the operation of a naturalistic discourse, where media-technology is seen as part of an evolutionary process autonomous from socio-political control.[13] Such a discourse, as Kellner (1997c) explains, has become particularly evident in 'information society' and 'information superhighway' rhetoric:

> the "natural" discourses of the information superhighway (i.e., surfing, cruising, the net, the web, connectivity, etc.) transform nature into culture and make the dramatic development of the information society a force of nature, a natural event that cannot be stopped. Indeed, the discourse appropriates both biological/natural metaphors and the figure of evolution to make it appear that the development of the new technologies and resultant social transformation is a natural process that in addition is a force of human progress, of development to higher spheres of social evolution. Such metaphors of nature and progress cover over the social constructedness of the new technologies, the corporate interests behind the project of technocapitalism and the infotainment society, and the social struggles over its future.

As Kellner indicates, this information society rhetoric is often used to justify ideologically driven public policy. For instance, Alvin Toffler's techno-determinist 'third wave' thesis has been used by Newt Gingrich to legitimate his information super-highway plans, the Bangemann Report (1994) has been used throughout Europe to justify liberalization of the information and media sectors, and Gates' (1995, 1999) writings on the inevitability of digital capitalism operate not only as a marketing tool for Microsoft's latest products but also provide legitimation for free market agendas.[14] Toffler and other techno-futurists also

[11] See, for example, Negroponte (1995).

[12] See, for example, Gates (1999) and Pool (1990).

[13] See especially Gates' (1999) biological model of digital capitalism.

[14] In the case of Toffler's thesis, 'virtually no consideration is given to the social and historical forces which have shaped the information and telecommunications technologies identified with the third wave of change' (Smart, 1992:74). Various information highway plans and policies, including the Bangemann Report commissioned by the European Council and Bill Gates' polemics, will be further looked at in the next chapter.

inspire the cyber-libertarian electronic democrats introduced in Chapter One. These libertarians promote their particular form of politics as the singular evolutionary path of a technological development that is to be most fully realized as a state-less cyberspace. We must, it seems, accept and adapt to the social and political forms that new media-technologies necessitate. Debates about alternatives are superfluous. When 'technical change is autonomous, arguments about the kind of democracy become largely irrelevant' (Street, 1997:29). We cannot decide what type of democracy we want to develop through cyberspace; cyberspace itself will determine the political forms which will arise. This argument obscures the interests and social forces behind the discourses and material forms developing. By calling upon an asocial necessity, it justifies any increase in inequalities and human suffering that result from the implementation of 'technologically progressive policies.'

Cyber-libertarianism tends to be positive about the direction of a society. A more dystopian current of technological determinism can be found in work inspired by postmodern theory.[15] Borrowing from poststructuralist discourse theories and Baudrillardian hyperreality, and reminiscent of the pessimism of the Frankfurt School, this fatalistic position tends to totalize the domination of life by large technological systems (Marx, 1994:257). This pessimistic postmodernism, like the more celebratory cyber-libertarianism, encourages mystification and passivity.

Despite its neglect of the agency of subjects, the techno-determinist argument has strong parallels with the uses tradition considered above. Both envision media-technology as, to various degrees, independent from social and political forces and contexts. Media-technology again is external to the social subject, the only difference is that now agency belongs to the technology rather than the user. Whereas the uses tradition goes as far as saying there is no text outside of readings, the strong technological determinist sees nothing outside text (that is, the medium itself).

4.2.3 Structures

A third approach to Internet research focuses upon the way outcomes are affected by broader social and economic structures and by the social shaping of technological

[15] See, for instance, Kroker (1992), Kroker and Kroker (1997), and Kroker and Weinstein (1995).

artefacts.[16] These researchers emphasize the development and deployment of the Internet within social systems and cultural contexts that have continuity over time and between media-technologies. As such, they directly draw upon a third 'structural determinations' strand of media and technology research. In media and communications studies this third strand is most prominently represented by the critical political economy approach, while in technology studies it is promoted by social shaping of technology (SST) researchers.

Critical political economists look at the determining impact of the ownership and control of the media upon subsequent development, deployment, and uses.[17] They generally pose a complex reading of Marxism, going beyond models that assume a direct determination of culture by economic structures. Garnham (1990:10) proposes 'a hierarchy of determination within a (capitalist) mode of production such that the possibilities at each succeeding level are limited by the resources made available by the logically preceding level.' Here determination is used in a 'soft' sense, not as the fixing of a causal relationship but rather as a setting of limits. The economic does not unilaterally predetermine human action but 'it does make some courses of action more likely than others' (ibid:6). Golding and Murdock (1991:19) attempt to rethink economic determination in an equally flexible way by following 'Stuart Hall in seeing determination as operating in the *first* instance.' On these grounds, they argue that the economic organization of the communications industry is 'the logical place to begin an analysis of contemporary culture' (ibid).

No matter how sophisticated, critical political economists come back to the economic sphere as the most important determination. Though providing a filter system between the economic and the cultural, Garnham's levels of determination build up from an economic base. 'A political economy . . . rests upon ultimate determination by the economic', continuing to build upon a 'base/superstructure' model and looking at how the 'development of monopoly capitalism has industrialized the superstructure' (Garnham, 1990:30). While Golding and Murdock (1991:15) 'focus on the interplay between the symbolic and economic dimensions of public communications' they, like Garnham, see the economic as most determinate. As they say, a 'critical political economy is concerned to explain how the

[16] For recent structural analysis of the Internet, see McChesney (1999), McChesney et al. (1998), and Schiller (1999). The Virtual Society research programme can be found at http://www.brunel .ac.uk/research/virtsoc/intro.htm (last accessed 2/3/00).

[17] Some of the central proponents of the critical political economy of the media are Gandy (1993), Garnham (1990), Golding and Murdock (1991), Herman and Chomsky (1988), McChesney (1997), Mosco (1996), Robins (1996b), D. Schiller (1996), and H. Schiller (1996). Golding and Murdock (1997) have recently released a very useful collection of some of the most influential works of critical political economy.

economic dynamics of production structure public discourse by promoting certain cultural forms over others' (Golding and Murdock, 1991:27).[18]

In the field of technology studies, the SST tradition has emphasized the social constitution of technological artefacts and systems.[19] As it is socially structured in certain ways, technology impacts in certain ways. This focus on social construction attempts to remedy the problems of technological determinism while at the same time avoiding 'a simplistic notion of "social determinism" which sees technology as reflecting a single rationality, such as an economic imperative' (Williams and Edge, 1996:54). Social and technical 'choices' shape technological artefacts (ibid). This is not meant imply a conscious voluntarism, as in much writing in the uses tradition, but rather to insist that technology reflects the social circumstances of its development (Woolgar, 1996:89). As Mosco (1989:73) asserts, 'technologies embody, in their production, distribution, and use, existing political and social relationships; technologies are thus little more than congealed social relationships.'

The possible uses of technology are limited by social relations built into the technology, relations that are 'relatively durable because they are not easily disrupted and repackaged' (Woolgar, 1996:90). On the other hand, the idea that technologies embody social choice allows for human agency in technological development. This, according to proponents of the SST position, 'makes possible a broader and more pro-active policy agenda' (Williams and Edge, 1996:54). The SST tradition thus neither denies the impact of technology nor the possibility of human inputs. It merely intends to investigate fully the social make-up of the technology involved: to open the 'black box' of technology in order to expose and analyse the socio-economic patterning of its innovation and content, factors often neglected by both uses and technological determinist approaches (Williams and Edge, 1996:54).

Both critical political economists and SST adherents agree that the uses and impacts of media-technologies are limited by the social constitution of technology. However, their focus is quite different. While SST theorists often concentrate quite narrowly upon the

[18] Critical political economists look at the structuring of both material resources and cultural meanings. As Garnham (1990:9) notes, when dealing with communications, 'we are dealing with a structured process because the human interactions involved are doubly determined by an inertia derived both from the structured set of material resources available and from the inherited set of meanings and cultural codes which the actors have at their disposal for understanding their situation and planning their future-directed strategies.'

[19] Williams and Edge (1996) provide a sympathetic overview of the SST tradition. For classic and influential SST-style analysis, see Bijker (1995), Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch (1987), Bijker and Law (1992), MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985), Winner (1992), and Winner (1985).

direct social inputs to the development of technological systems, critical political economists attempt to look at the role of the wider power relations and social structures.[20] Emphasizing this society-wide focus, Blumler and Gurevitch (1995:98) assert that 'the media can pursue democratic values only in ways that are compatible with the socio-political and economic environment in which they operate. Political communication arrangements follow the contours of and derive their resources from the society of which they are a part.'

This structuralist perspective, like the uses and effects approaches, will provide distorted understanding of media-technology processes if developed without reference to other determinations. Golding and Murdock (1991:18) point out that social contextualist positions, if over-extended, can degenerate into instrumentalism and/or structuralism. In terms of instrumentalism, critical political economists and SST adherents can place too much emphasis upon the intentionality of certain human agents. SST theorists tend to concentrate upon the micro settings of the development and deployment of technological artefacts.[21] This narrow focus, without an accompanying account of the broader structures impacting upon outcomes, leads to an over-emphasis upon the social choice and control of those involved in developing the technology (Williams and Edge, 1996:65). Critical political economists, though generally placing more importance upon the wider social context than SST researchers, can also be guilty of a certain voluntarism: they may exaggerate the degree to which media-technologies are simply tools for the powerful to pursue their interests. Golding and Murdock (1991:18) point to Herman and Chomsky's 'propaganda model' as a good example of this exaggeration of the extent to which the powerful 'manage' public opinion through the mass media.[22] Such instrumentalism is also evident in the Frankfurt School's analysis of cultural domination by the ruling classes. Some recent critiques of the commercialization of cyberspace have echoed a similar conspirational air. Herbert Schiller (1995b), for instance, argues that there has been an orchestrated corporate takeover of information and communication systems, including the Internet, which are now at the disposal of unaccountable private economic power. Such

[20] Graham Murdock (private correspondence, 1996) emphasized to me the importance that critical political economists place upon the analysis of social structures beyond those normally considered to be immediately associated with the media industry.

[21] This concentration upon micro analysis by SST theorists is sometimes based upon an explicit and naïve rejection of 'big' theorizing. For instance, as Williams and Edge (1996:65) point out, 'actor-network theorists like Callon and Latour are highly sceptical about the nature and influence of pre-existing, large-scale social structures such as classes and markets.'

[22] Herman (1996) argues that there is less intentionality and more complexity involved in the 'propaganda model' than his critics allow for.

analyses fail to provide an adequate account of how media-technologies involve multiple interests, unintended consequences, and communicative spaces of semi-autonomous action.

It must be said however, that most critical political economists and SST theorists are aware of this instrumentalist pitfall. They attempt, as Golding and Murdock (1991:19) explicitly assert, to take into account the contradictions and complexities that always prevent the powerful (or any other groups) from having total control. Both traditions focus upon the embeddedness of media-technologies within social and cultural systems. However, an overly strong emphasis upon structures can lead to accounts that underestimate the agency and meaning of social actors. This one-sided structuralism can be detected in some recent political economy media analysis. For instance, Schiller (1995b) believes that the rules of the market have taken over.[23] Information technologies are not just the tools of the powerful but of the capitalist economy. The centrality of information technologies to the development of advanced capitalism in this argument means that Schiller risks both structural and technological determinism.[24] Such faults are clearly apparent within Harris and Davidson's (1994) Marxist analysis of *The Cybernetic Revolution and the Crisis of Capitalism.* Drawing out a strongly deterministic reading of Marx via Toffler's third way thesis, Harris and Davidson argue not only that the economic base drives social and cultural changes, but that information has now become the central means of production. In other words, 'information capitalism' now fully determines our collective fate.

This critical review of the social contextualist strand brings to a close my survey of the main methodological traditions being drawn upon by Internet researchers. I have shown that these traditions tend to emphasize either the uses, technological form, or social structures associated with communications media. All three determinations are important, but they can lead to flawed analysis when taken on their own. In the next section I will look for an approach to Internet research that will overcome the problems that can result from the singular application of each determination.

[23] Schiller's writing shows how structural determinism can slide into instrumental determinism and vice-versa. The claim that media-technologies are instruments of elites (crudely) follows from the argument that the class structure determines social relations.

[24] I agree with Thompson (1995:164) that despite Schiller's tendency towards economic reductionism, his general theory is useful for understanding the media in terms of globalization.

4.3 The System-Lifeworld as a Comprehensive Methodological Framework

I have shown that Internet research currently draws upon three broad strands that each provide important but partial understandings of media-technologies. Research, such as mine, that aims to gain a general understanding of complex communication systems cannot simply rely upon one of these three strands. In this section I develop a research framework that draws the strands together in order to overcome the pitfalls that result when each is taken in isolation. Such a framework will enable a comprehensive analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere.

Despite the differences of approach, the various pitfalls outlined above share two common problems that need to be avoided when looking at media-technologies: separating technology from the rest of the socio-cultural formation, and narrowly focusing upon a single determination.

The first problem occurs when media-technology is seen as an independent 'thing' that either acts upon social relations from above or is itself acted upon by social forces and actors. This notion of media-technology as an autonomous artefact needs to be avoided. As Leo Marx (1997:979) says, there is always a 'distinctive material device, a piece of equipment', but this often constitutes a small aspect of technology. '[I]n the major contemporary technologies the material component - *technology* narrowly conceived as a physical device – is merely one part of a complex social and institutional matrix.' This matrix, as Marx asserts, stretches across a wide range of social institutions, including private corporations, systems of capital investment, organized bodies of technical know-how, government legislative and regulatory bodies, the military, universities, and so on.

With technology, as Marx (1997:980) asserts, we are dealing with an indeterminate, messy, incoherent entity. The lines separating different technologies from one another and from society are murky, relative, and contingent upon a prevailing social consensus. Menser and Aronowitz (1996:8-9) argue that

> technology *permeates*, or inheres in, all . . . regions, practices, and ideologies. . . . The objects of our critiques have become impure, confused, indistinct, "fuzzy" in the way in which even mathematics has accepted "inexactness" as sometimes closer to the way things really are.

However, we must be careful not to take such claims of indeterminacy too far, for as Marx (1997:981-983) warns, this may lead to an understanding of technology so inclusive, so general, so various, and its boundaries so vague, that it becomes almost completely vacuous and resistant to designation. Such an understanding would mean that we are unable to say anything of any genuine interest or value about a technology or technology in general. This is the case, as Marx (1997:983-984) indicates, with Jacques Ellul's notion of *technique*: 'By identifying it with every act of making or doing, material or social, he drains it of all particularity and discreetness; the result is that it has little or no useful, specifiable meaning.' And because this technique is so intangible and all-pervasive, it seems to fall beyond human control.

To avoid viewing media-technologies as either autonomous 'things' or amorphous 'no-things', they must be seen as both constituted within and impacting upon social relations and cultural meanings (Sclove, 1992:140-141). This idea, that media-technologies are both socially constituted and constituting, helps overcome the second closely related problem that the three traditions may slip into, the problem of singular causation arguments.

Often in media-technology theories one 'cause' tends to become a fixed variable in a linear relationship with outcomes. Even those who prescribe complex levels of determination, such as critical political economists, in the end tend to favour just one determination. As seen above, such singular causation arguments risk instrumentalism, technological determinism, or structuralism. In reality, no hierarchy or linear causation can be finally specified. To overcome these problems, media-technology must be seen as constituted and constituting in complex and multiple ways. As Menser and Aronowitz (1996:8) argue, we need to counter such determinism with a 'theory of *complexity*' that rejects determination in the sense of 'a one-to-one correspondence between the causal agent and its effects.'

A comprehensive, non-reductionist analysis of media-technology must consider the complex interplay between the different determinations highlighted by the three traditions outlined above. As Kellner (1997a:153), Menser and Aronowitz (1996:8), and Mosco (1996:5) argue, a 'multiperspectival' or 'transdisciplinary' or 'multi determination' approach is needed.[25] But how are we to do this? Some media theorists have adopted Giddens'

[25] Not every media-technology study need be multiperspectival. In contrast to the type of investigation in this thesis, some research may concentrate upon a specific aspect of the phenomenon under question. The important thing is that researchers must be aware of the pitfalls of the particular method being used and be explicit about the limitations of their claims.

structuration theory when attempting to balance multiple determinations.[26] Others have used the metaphor of the text as a way to draw the three media-technology strands together.[27] I want to suggest that Habermas' system-lifeworld thesis, introduced in Chapter Two as an explanation for the dynamics of modern development, also provides a methodological framework by which to carry out an analysis that takes into account the three levels of determination (uses, effects, structures).

The system-lifeworld thesis provides a two-level approach to society that avoids the one sided reductionist forms of analysis. Analysis of the lifeworld focuses upon the symbolic reproduction of meaning, solidarities, and personalities. This reproduction coordinates social life through the medium of communicative action that constitutes both the public and intimate spheres. Analysis at the system's level focuses on material reproduction, on the coordination of action through the state and the economy. The two levels of this Habermasian conception correspond to the uses and structures strands of media-technology research traditions. On the one hand, attention is directed to the everyday practices and meanings of actors at the lifeworld level, as emphasized by 'uses determinations' researchers.[28] On the other hand, the focus is upon the abstract processes of functional integration at the system's level as emphasized by the 'structural determinations' researchers. The 'effects' strand of media-technology research is taken into account at both levels of the system-lifeworld conception. At the system's level, media-technologies act as delinguistified media, organizing 'human action while minimizing the need for language' (Feenberg, 1996:57). In capitalism, this technical organization of human action has spilled over into social reproduction, which has, in combination with money and power, lead to the

[26] Samarajiva and Shields (1997) and Tsagarousianou (1998:173) both suggest that Giddens' structuration theory is useful for analysing computer networks.

[27] There are other ways to talk about bringing the different traditions and categories together to express the complexity and multi-determinations of media-technology. For instance, we could turn to the metaphor of the text in the sense utilized by Morley and Woolgar. Against Halloran's (1970) and Fiske's (1987) model of 'reader sovereignty' (semiotic openness) and also its opposite (textual determinism), Morley has developed Hall's (1980) idea of a 'preferred reading' structured by the social context of writing and reading. 'The point of the preferred reading model was to insist that readers are, engaged in productive work, but under determinate conditions. Those determinate conditions are supplied both by the text, the producing institution and by the social history of the audience' (Morley, 1989:19). Morley (1992:52) explains that the moment of "encoding" exerts, 'from the production end', an 'over-determining' effect 'though not a fully determined closure.' Applying the metaphor of the text to technology, Woolgar (1996, 1991a, 1991b) shows how the idea of the preferred reading of technology (as text) allows for all three levels of determination. Embedded within the social context, technology can be thought of as 'congealed social relations' that both 'configures the user-reader' and has 'interpretive flexibility' allowing various readings or uses.

[28] Focusing upon symbolic reproduction through communicative action (that is, upon the lifeworld of actors) rather than upon 'uses' replaces the latter's problematic links to a sovereign subject with a conception more suitable to a post-metaphysical analysis.

colonization of the lifeworld by instrumental rationality. Media-technologies can also have a positive influence at the level of the lifeworld. They can facilitate processes of symbolic reproduction including communicative rationality.[29]

In these terms, the system-lifeworld conception offers a broad framework that is able to coordinate and hence overcome the partiality of the three dominant strands of media-technology research. It also provides a way to investigate the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere that is both analytical and evaluative. In other words, it provides a critical approach that is not only descriptive but normative.[30] Some critics argue that the system-lifeworld conception should not be seen as methodological and explanatory at once. Critics particularly object to claims that the conception represents real social processes and institutions. As Feenberg (1996:62) notes,

> Axel Honneth, among others, objects to Habermas's identification of the terms of this [system-lifeworld] distinction with actual institutions, e.g. state, market, family, school. In reality there is no clear institutional line between system and lifeworld. Production as much as the family is constituted by a promiscuous mixture of cognitive, normative, and expressive codes, success-oriented and communicative action. The distinction is therefore purely analytic.

Rasmussen (1990:51), drawing on Honneth's criticism, argues that,

> ultimately, the distinction is based upon two theoretical fictions, namely, that an action system can occur independently of the normative building of consensus, and that a communicatively integrated action sphere, the lifeworld, can occur independently of domination by relations of power.

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[29] Habermas' (1970) early writings, like many philosophies of technology, seem to promote a separation of technology from the lifeworld. He criticized the technicist consciousness that he saw developing due to technology increasingly encroaching upon the sphere of human meaning, replacing communicative processes necessary for healthy socio-cultural reproduction with an instrumental rationality driven by logics autonomous from human understanding. While this critique seems valid, it does not mean that technology must be categorically excluded from the lifeworld. Habermas' later work on the theory of communicative action, though not explicit about the place of technology, allows us to think of how media-technologies can operate as mediators of both instrumental and communicative action, of technical rationality and human meaning formation.

[30] While all methodologies offer a language that aids the interpretation of findings (although this may be denied by some positivist traditions), most do not follow critical theory in explicitly claiming to help the inquirer make political judgements about research findings.

However, I believe the system-lifeworld does indeed point to a real substantive distinction. In making sense of the modernization process, as Feenberg (1996:62) notes, we can distinguish between institutional contexts that are predominantly shaped by money and power and those in which personal relations and communicative rationality are primary. The system-lifeworld distinction highlights logics that can be clearly observed in real processes and social dynamics, for instance, in the differentiation of spheres within modernity and the way that the economy and politics set limits on the socio-cultural order.[31]

The system-lifeworld distinction thus offers both an analytic and evaluative conception for critical research into media-technologies including the Internet. As analytic, it provides a comprehensive research methodology, an approach to social research that balances cultural, technological, and structural determinations. As evaluative, it points to normative logics of societal development, including possibilities for the development of the public sphere.

4.4 Research Procedure and Methods

I have shown that the system-lifeworld theory, in combination with the public sphere conception, provides a broad framework by which to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. I will now use this framework to help decide upon the appropriate methods for the analysis.

The system-lifeworld conception demands that we look at society from two perspectives. On the one hand, society can be seen from the participant perspective of acting subjects, as the lifeworld of a social group. On the other hand, society can be conceived from the observer perspective of someone not involved, as a functional system of (unconscious) actions coordinated for the maintenance of material reproduction. The distinction guides but does not dictate the specific methods to employ. As Cooke (1994:7-8) argues, 'the distinction between system and lifeworld is to a certain extent independent' of 'the question of the appropriate methodological perspective' to use. While not dictating method, the system-lifeworld distinction does mean that some methods will be more applicable to one

[31] I have outlined the system-lifeworld theory in Chapter Two without considering critiques or attempting a comprehensive defence. As explained with regards to the public sphere conception in Section 3.2, I will not offer in this thesis a rebuttal of all critiques of the theory of communicative action (including the system-lifeworld thesis). I am only looking to ensure it can do the job asked of it here, to provide a critical methodology and social contextualization for the evaluation of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere.

level than the other. Analysis at the level of the lifeworld of social reproduction suggests methods such as hermeneutics that attempt to interpret the subjective world, to understand the meanings behind social interaction. Analysis at the level of the system suggests methods such as political economy that focus upon the objective world, attempting to illuminate and explain 'abstract' social processes.

The public sphere conception offers a second methodological resource for my evaluation. While the system-lifeworld distinction provides a general framework, the public sphere conception offers a more discriminatory analytical device by which to sort through and critique the substantive material under consideration. Its empirical function falls between that of a discrete variable (as in 'pure' quantitative research) and a sensitizing concept (as in 'pure' qualitative research). I avoid operationalizing the public sphere requirements as a set of fixed indicators for quantitative analysis because of the extent to which meaning can be lost when rigid concepts are employed to quantify complex real world practices such as those that constitute cyberspace and the public sphere.[32] Examples of poor results from the operationalization of cyber-democracy concepts are not hard to find.[33] Take for example Schneider's (1997) exploration of the possibility of an online public sphere developing. Schneider defines the public sphere via four criteria which he uses to carry out a content analysis of a Usenet group: equality, quality, diversity, and reciprocity. However, his criteria are defined so narrowly that that the results are rendered largely meaningless. For instance, Schneider's definition of equality is simply 'equal distribution of voices.' This definition measures what is easiest to count, 'the frequency of expression and average quantity of expression', but fails to adequately measure the extent of equality within the Newsgroup concerned because frequency of expression may not actually correlate with equality. Schneider needs to look at other indicators of discursive equality like the opportunities available for different people to take part in the discourse and the power relations involved. The problem here is not simply one of choosing the right indicators.

[32] See Hammersley (1990:1) for further discussion of the loss of meaning that takes place in quantitative research.

[33] See for instance Schneider's (1997) and Wilhelm's (1999) content analysis of online deliberation and Bimber's (1996) and Hill and Hughes' (1998) quantitative analysis of cyber-politics. These researchers are not unaware of the limitations of their quantitatively driven operationalizations. Schneider (1997:73) admits that the dimensions he selects for his content analysis 'are likely to have a significant impact on the conclusions reached. Other dimensions . . . would likely produce alternative results.' Bimber (1996) also admits to the difficulty of operationalizing for quantitative analysis the 'deliberativeness' of content (whether online or in the mass media). However, these projects are not completely crippled by the problems of adequately specifying empirical indicators. While parts of these research projects suffer from a loss of meaning due to overly simplistic operationalization of complex phenomena, other parts offer useful quantitative analysis that I will draw upon in Chapter Six.

'Opportunity' and 'power' remain largely resistant to being defined as indicators that can be counted. To keep their meaning we need to leave them with a certain roundness that requires qualitative research. However, the public sphere idealization does not operate merely as a 'sensitizing' concept such as can be found in 'grounded' qualitative research.[34] While the conception is socially grounded and thus open to revision, it is not developed during the empirical investigation, as is the case for sensitizing concepts. It is a well defined analytic category that stringently guides research, allowing one to decisively sort through the huge amount of material on hand.

From the combination of system-lifeworld and public sphere conceptions, I can now outline specific methods for my analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. At the system's level we need to concentrate upon the relationship between the subsystems of the state and economy and the Internet. Systemic relations are often neglected in studies of cyber-democracy.[35] In Chapter Five I aim to remedy this neglect. Since it is important to acknowledge the influence of wider socio-historical contexts, I will begin my 'systems analysis' (loosely conceived) with an overview of the relationship between new communications networks and the wider politico-economic situation. Here I will also provide a brief history of Internet developments. This overview will provide a contextualization for my research and will show the continuing problem of the colonization of the lifeworld by system's media. I will then look at the specific relationship between subsystems (state and economy) and the Internet. To do so I will draw upon approaches outlined earlier in this chapter, particularly the critical political economy tradition. My concern is to evaluate the degree to which state and corporate control of cyberspace may be restricting online public deliberation. In this system's evaluation, two of the seven public sphere requirements outlined in Chapter Two are more explicitly implicated than the others: discursive inclusion and the autonomy of moral-practical discourse from system's media. These two requirements are very much influenced by the extent and form of state and commercial control of the Internet. My aim in Chapter Five will be to come to some conclusion about the degree to which these two requirements are fulfilled. In addition, the system's analysis will contextualize the five other (more discursive) requirements of the public sphere, allowing me to link my latter evaluation of online interaction with the wider social structures that encompass cyber-practices.

[34] On the use of sensitizing concepts, see Hammersley (1990:159-160).

[35] See, for instance, the Internet-democracy studies of Bonchek (1997) and Schneider (1997) which focus upon flows of ideas and micro-practices.

At the level of the lifeworld, analysis focuses specifically upon an evaluation of online public discourse via its comparison with the public sphere conception. How can this be done given that cyberspace is such an expansive, diverse, and amorphous phenomenon? The majority of studies of online discourse limit themselves to very specific aspects of cyber-communications. They typically focus upon individuals or groups over short periods of time, and on specific dialogue spaces (Usenet groups, specific lists, etc).[36] Many such studies, as Smith (1999:196) observes, attempt to make broad generalizations and characterizations from their limited samples. Given the vast amount of diverse activity cyberspace encompasses, such generalizations are simply not possible from narrowly focused studies. This is not to say that these studies are not useful for understanding 'individual experiences and the events occurring in individual groups' (Smith, 1999:196). Yet to make generalizations about the Internet we have to look at what Smith (ibid) calls 'the emergent social structure that grows out of the aggregation of tens of thousands.' We have to carry out an extensive overview of the whole of cyberspace. This is what I will do in Chapter Six. I will undertake a general evaluation of a wide range of public cyber-communications, comparing them with the five explicitly discursive requirements of the public sphere conception not dealt with at the system's level: reciprocity, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, and discursive equality. Given that cyber-culture is so vast and varied and my personal resources are so limited, I obviously cannot undertake such a general analysis of cyber-communications directly (that is, using 'original' or 'primary' data). Yet I can draw upon the large amount of cyber-culture research available, including content analyses, participant observations, survey materials, and interviews with participants, and combine their findings with my own personal observations.[37] It will be especially important to draw upon research that gets at the perspective of those involved, because it is the agents themselves who must be the final judges of the interactions with which they are involved (Forst, 1996:149; Chambers, 1996:205).

By drawing upon existing research and my own observations of online public discourse, I believe that I can make a reasonable assessment of the degree to which public cyber-culture may approximate the requirements of rational discourse as set out in the public sphere conception. However, I do not only want to *measure* the extent to which online discourse approximates the public sphere conception. I also want to know how really existing online public deliberations can *more fully* facilitate the public sphere conception. This can be

[36] See for instance the studies of Philips (1996), Pfaffenberger (1996), and Schneider (1997).

[37] As well as extensive Web 'surfing', I have since 1995 taken part in a number of e-mail lists, Usenet groups, chat groups, and Web forums, both for professional and private ends.

looked at via an analysis of exemplary cases – of online projects that actually attempt to realize the public sphere through online deliberations. I will undertake such a case analysis in Chapter Seven. The aim will be to find out how projects attempt to structure interactions towards achieving the goals of rational discourse and how successful they are at doing so. This evaluation first requires an investigation of the software chosen, the site layout, the rules of interaction and their associated methods of enforcement, the organizational structure, and so on. Such investigations can be undertaken through an analysis of the (online) site and via (online and offline) interviews with project organizers and participants. Second, I need to look at the actual online interactions in order to evaluate how successful the intended structuring actually is. With Internet communications we have direct access to ongoing, and often archived, public interactions.[38] Thus, online qualitative and quantitative content analysis can be readily undertaken. There are a number of things that can be usefully counted such as the number and types of messages, the number of regular posters versus non-posters, and the number of people online. However, quantitative analysis is of limited use because, as noted above, it misses out much of what is actually going on in social interactions. Qualitative analysis is much more useful here. I will observe interactions over time, rather than merely taking single postings as units of analysis. To support my investigations of the structuring of online discourse I also intend to draw upon secondary documentation: reports, press releases, and independent research.

I have now outlined the specific methods that I will be using. I want to finally discuss the status I will give to the findings that come out of my investigation. Given post-positivist critiques of empiricism, the idea that a replicable objective scientific method can reveal and measure undistorted 'Reality' must be discarded. The subjective, interpretative aspect of social research must be acknowledged. Yet we must (and can) also aim for credibility of our social claims. Our work is judged within, and legitimated by, an ongoing discourse. Validity is gained when arguments convince those involved in the rational-critical argumentation concerned. There are a number of ways by which to make arguments convincing and credible. We can offer a high degree of transparency (disclosure) of our values, methods, and procedures. Observers can then determine (confirm) for themselves if the argument, interpretations, and evaluations are reasonable and convincing. Further, although we cannot have a method which provides full transparency, we can choose methods that provide 'better' interpretations of what is going on. For instance, we can

[38] I will treat postings on the public Internet forums I study as published material. As such, and having been given permission from list owners concerned, I will directly quote material from the forums concerned and use the authors' identities as provided.

define carefully what is being looked for, utilize triangulation, attempt to be consistent with other research, provide a logical chain of evidence, and finally, allow research participants to check and improve upon the reconstructions of the multiple realities of their everyday lives.[39] Rather than an objective truth of what *is* going on, validity is based upon the shared agreement of those involved. I believe that my research design covers many of these validity requirements. As well as attempting to be as open as possible about my research methods and processes, I utilize a precise model of what is being looked for, apply a multiplicity of research methods and perspectives (triangulation), follow a systematic approach, include auditing by soliciting the comments of research participants and critical feedback from other researchers, and draw upon as much relevant research and secondary documentation as I can. I hope by following these conditions that my evaluation in the next few chapters will not only be convincing but provide the basis for further research.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed three strong media-technology research strands that current Internet research investigations draw upon. Each strand emphasizes a different determination: uses, technological form, and social structures. I have pointed to two general pitfalls into which each of these strands may slip. The first is a tendency to treat media-technologies as autonomous from social life. The second pitfall involves relying upon a singular determination. In contrast, I have argued that we must employ a multi-perspectival approach that not only situates media-technology within social and cultural processes but that also takes into account a wide range of determinations.

I have proposed that the system-lifeworld thesis offers a suitable framework for this multi-perspectival evaluation. The system-lifeworld distinction combines an analysis of instrumental and strategic action, that coordinate the subsystems of administrative power and the economy, with an analysis of communicative action that coordinates human meaning. This two-level conception operates as methodological and evaluative at once, providing both a guide to empirical analysis and a critical understanding of the possibility of the public sphere being enhanced through the Internet under present socio-cultural conditions. At the level of the system, I will evaluate relationships between the subsystems and the Internet, particularly looking at the extent to which money and power colonize

[39] On improving validity through interpretative methods, see Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Yin (1989).

online public interaction. This system's analysis will be undertaken in Chapter Five. Then, in Chapter Six, I move to the lifeworld-level of analysis, comparing everyday online interactions with the public sphere conception. I will ask if the discursive requirements of the public sphere can be drawn out from cyber-discourses. I will then look at how any impediments to the public sphere being facilitated through the Internet can be overcome. To do this, Chapter Seven will undertake an analysis of online-democracy initiatives that explicitly attempt to enhance the public sphere through the Internet.

Chapter 5 The Threat of System Colonization

5.1 Introduction

A cursory examination of cyberspace can identify numerous online spaces of public interaction. Every day thousands of people interact online through e-mail, bulletin boards, chat-lines, e-mail lists, and MUDs. The Web accommodates all these diverse forms of interaction and also allows individuals to communicate with others through hypertext publishing. Over 45% of US Internet users now go online at least occasionally to take part in chat rooms or discussion lists (The Pew Research Center, 1999).[1] Much of this interaction can be seen to contain deliberative aspects, a factor that lends support to claims that the Internet may facilitate the enhancement of the public sphere.

However, cyber-democracy enthusiasts warn that increasing control of the Internet by state and corporate interests will destroy online public fora. Will the Internet go the same way as Habermas and others argue the mass media largely has, becoming ever more controlled by state and corporate interests? Will administrative power and money undermine the possibilities of the Internet enhancing the public sphere, replacing communicative rationality with instrumental-strategic rationality within spaces of online interaction? This question will be the focus of the present chapter. I will consider the relationship between the Internet and the state and economy, evaluating the threat posed by money and power to online communicative interaction. Particularly under question here, out of the seven requirements of the public sphere conception outlined in Chapter Two, are the conditions of autonomy and inclusion. These two requirements are both directly effected by the increasing control of cyberspace by state and corporate interests.

I begin the analysis with a consideration of late capitalism and the nation-state, showing that system colonization of the lifeworld can still be seen operating within contemporary societies. I then provide a brief history of the Internet which establishes that cyberspace has been dominated by various state and corporate interests since the Internet's inception. The

[1] Much research on Internet demographics merely approaches online users inviting their replies to an online survey. This relies on participant self-selection and offers no reliable basis for generalization. Pew research offers random sampling of the whole US population. The survey quoted here (The Pew Research Centre, 1999) is based on telephone interviews of a US nationwide sample of 3,184 adults, aged 18 years or older, between the period October 26 and December 1, 1998.

next two sections of the chapter consider the extent to which this general domination of cyberspace translates into a colonization of online interaction by administrative power and money, and what impact this has upon the Internet facilitating an open and autonomous public sphere. Looking at administrative power in relation to the Internet, I consider four overlapping mechanisms of cybernetic governance that are presently operating: censorship, surveillance, control of technological form, and online publicity. I then investigate three overlapping aspects of corporate colonization that impact upon cyber-communications: commodification of the Internet, corporate control of online interactions, and online commerce.

My evaluation will attempt to come to a conclusion about the extent to which inclusive online public discourse can take place in the face of these colonizing processes. To do this I draw upon, in particular, the critical political economy approach. As introduced in Chapter Four, this approach examines the structural features of media-technology, taking into account relations of media ownership and control, determinations of the wider socio-economic (capitalist) system, and the complex historical dynamics involved (Golding and Murdock, 1991; Webster, 1995:75). I also take note of the social shaping of the Internet (as informed by the work of SST theorists) and at the possibilities for interpretative flexibility – the way participants can utilize the Internet in ways other than those for which it has been designed (as informed by the work of cultural 'uses' theorists).

5.2 General Contextualization: Colonization of the Lifeworld at the Turn of the Millennium

Since Habermas developed his system-lifeworld theory in the 1970s and early 1980s, a series of wide ranging social, political, economic, and technological developments have led to various claims of radical change in the organization of the capitalist mode of material reproduction and the sovereignty of nation-states. Here I want to overview these developments in order to see if they follow the course, described by Habermas, of an increasing colonization of the spaces of communicative action by the instrumental rationality of economic and administrative power. I examine the central aspects of the present political and economic context that pertain to the colonization thesis, drawing particular attention to the important role of new media and information technologies. Three questions will be investigated. First, has there been a move to an information or post-capitalist society that alters the relations of capital to such an extent that talk of corporate colonization becomes nonsensical? Second, has globalization led to such a radical diminishment of administrative

power that talk of state colonization is little more than an historical anachronism? Third, if the answer to either or both of these questions is no, and lifeworld colonization is indeed taking place, then to what extent is this occurring, and what impact is this having upon the public sphere at large?

5.2.1 Post-Capitalism or High-Capitalism?

Analysis of the social changes of the latter half of the twentieth century has been dominated by two camps: theories of 'post-industrialism' or 'information society', and theories of 'late capitalism' or 'high capitalism.'[2] Here I will undertake a brief comparison of these two broad theoretical positions, arguing that the second provides a more convincing interpretation of contemporary social conditions. The result is that the colonization thesis is not only upheld but extended.

Post-industrialism or information society theories have primarily been inspired by Daniel Bell (1973) and popularized by the futurist 'third wave' guru Alvin Toffler (1981). Central to these theories is the idea that information technologies have facilitated a radical shift from industrial capitalism to an information-based society. Social relations have been transformed to at least the extent that occurred through the 'industrial revolution.' Fundamental to this new revolution is the growing importance of information. According to Bell (1973), information is now the key resource and central organizing principle of post-industrialism. In similar fashion, McLuhan (1973:69, 369) argues that '[a]ll forms of wealth' now 'result from the movement of information' because information is now the most important commodity.[3]

Such claims have lead to the notion, promoted particularly by libertarians, that a post-capitalist or at least a post-corporate capitalist society has developed on the basis of information transfers. As Newt Gingrich (1995:57), who is advised by Toffler, declares:

> more and more people are going to operate outside corporate structures and hierarchies in the nooks and crannies that the Information Revolution creates. While

[2] I prefer high capitalism to Mandel's (1975) term late capitalism. While capitalism may not yet be in its last stage, as the term 'late' indicates, it has indeed developed and reached new (if vulnerable) heights towards the end of the twentieth century. However, late capitalism is the most often used of the two terms and I will employ them interchangeable here.

[3] McLuhan can be seen as an important precursor to the post-industrial thesis, emphasizing the significance of information in a move from the 'mechanical age' to an 'electric age' (Smart, 1992:116-117).

> the Industrial Revolution herded people into gigantic social institutions – big corporations, big unions, big government – the Information Revolution is breaking up these giants and leading us back to something that is – strangely enough – much more like Tocqueville's 1830s America.

The information society empowers individuals (as consumers) rather than the state and corporates. This crude version of the information society thesis has become highly influential in many policy circles where information is being seen as the source of future economic prosperity. Howard Frederick (1998), distinguished academic and Director of *The New Zealand Internet Institute*, conflates the information society with the information economy in his vision for New Zealand's future potential to prosper as a cyber-society. The European Commission sees knowledge resources as the basis of 'competitive advantage' in its information society plans (Bangemann, 1995).[4] The US administration has been building its model of a global information infrastructure on the assumption that information is at the centre of future global economic prosperity (Gore, 1995). Many developing nations have also embraced the information economy rhetoric and integrated its logic into their national development plans (Winseck, 1997:232-233). Cities all over the world are attempting to gain competitive advantage by positioning themselves as knowledge and information centres, from Singapore to Manchestor to Wellington.[5]

The weakness of this technologically determinist emphasis on an information society becomes apparent on comparison with the more rigorous political economy analysis offered by theorists of 'late capitalism.' Such theorists demonstrate that corporate capitalism remains dominant, rather than dissolving into the libertarian vision of individual empowerment, precisely *because of* changes in the 'regime of accumulation.' 'Late', 'high', 'flexible', or 'disorganized' capitalism, Harvey (1989) and Lash and Urry (1987) show, involves a move away from centralized mass production and consumption (Fordism) towards flexible and decentralized forms of production and the development of specialized markets (post-Fordism). This decentralization of production sites and markets is an integral part of the increasing control of capital by a small number of conglomerates. As Harvey (1989:159) argues, 'capitalism is becoming ever more tightly organised *through* dispersal, geographical

[4] Following the Bangemann Report, the European Commission has launched an Inter-Regional Information Society Initiative (IRIS) which will 'assist a group of pilot regions in developing the information society' (Carter, 1997:148).

[5] On Singapore's plans, see Rodan (1998). On Manchester's plans, see Carter (1997). On Wellington's initiatives, see the Wellington Info City Project outline at http://www.wcc.govt.nz/wcc/infocity/ (last accessed 8/12/99).

mobility, and flexible responses in labour markets, labour processes, and consumer markets.' At the same time, the production of demand becomes as important as that of goods. To achieve this, new forms of marketing have been developed by offering personalized products and service and by diversifying product lines (strategic branding). Consumer demand is further increased by a continuing 'penetration and colonisation of hitherto uncommodified areas' of culture by capital (Jameson, 1988:348). Late capitalism, as Jameson notes, can thus also be known as consumer capitalism. While some libertarian information society theorists may interpret and celebrate these developments as providing greater individual empowerment, it clearly signifies a demise of public culture and sovereignty.

In agreement with information society theorists, the commodification of information or knowledge is seen as a central feature of late capitalism.[6] Lyotard (1984), drawing upon both post-industrial and post-Fordist analyses, argues that it is part of our 'postmodern condition' that knowledge is increasingly being produced merely for its exchange value, to be sold as a commodity.[7] Knowledge, according to Lyotard (ibid:4-5), has become 'the principal force of production over the last two decades', and 'in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major – perhaps the major – stake in the worldwide competition for power.' A recent report by The United Nations Development Program (1999) similarly argues that 'writing computer programs and revealing genetic codes have replaced the search for gold, the conquest of land and the command of machinery as the path to economic power.' Furthermore, there is little argument about the central role of global systems of computerized communication in the transfers of informational commodities. Where the late capitalist thesis differentiates itself is in the interpretation of the social consequences of these developments. Rather than leading to a post-capitalist society, late capitalist theorists show that computerization and informatization have mediated the deterritorialization of capital and its global unification (Guattari and Negri, 1990:48-49). Global information and communication networks have enabled the internationalization of capitalism and thus the growth of an integrated global financial market, the universalization of consumer capitalism through more extensive and

[6] Late capitalist theories overlap with information society theories in many ways, particularly in emphasizing the increasing importance of information. The major disagreement between the theories is on the interpretation of the changes that have occurred. While one sees individual empowerment through markets, the other sees consumer capitalism undermining public sovereignty.

[7] Both information society and late capitalist theories are drawn upon by theorists who see information as central to a 'postmodern society.' For instance, see the postmodernization thesis of Crook et al. (1992) which posits the beginnings of a 'genuinely new historical configuration', the association of postmodernism with a post-industrial society in Lyotard (1984), and the importance given to information technologies in shifts in social patterns by Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b) and Poster (1995).

intensive marketing and management of desire, and the expansion of multi-national companies by allowing greater control, coordination and monitoring of ever more dispersed operations (Castells, 1996).[8] The commodification of information and knowledge also extends the process of the encroachment of market values into previously non-commercial areas of life.[9] More and more of what was public information becomes a private commodity.[10]

Rather than the weakening of corporate capitalism and the advent of a radically new form of 'information society', capitalist relations have become increasingly centralized through the dispersal and flexibility enabled by communications technologies and the commodification of information and culture in general. All spheres of life are being encompassed by the logic of the market. This indicates a universalization of capitalism; that it is reaching a purer, more developed stage, its 'maturity' (Wood, 1998:47; Jameson, 1991). The resulting consumer capitalism promotes an intensely private way of life in which individualized consumption takes the place of public participation (Webster, 1995:95). These developments not only support but extend Habermas' thesis of the encroachment of instrumentally structured capitalist relations into the communicatively structured lifeworld.

5.2.2 Globalization and State Power

The colonization thesis argues that administrative power has increasingly permeated the lifeworld, turning autonomous citizens into clients of the state. But the Keynesian welfare-state arrangements that provide the context for this argument seem to have been increasingly undone by, amongst other things, the deterritorialization of capital. Economic globalization – the expansion of international networks of production, distribution, consumption, and finance – is believed to undermine the power of nation-states.[11] What does this globalization mean for the thesis of the colonization of the lifeworld by administrative power?

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[8] Castells locates flows of information at the centre of what he refers to as the new 'information network society.' On one level this argument resembles the information society tradition. It has a technological determinist flavour parallelling Bell's argument – that technological developments have led to a shift from industrial to informational society (Webster, 1995:196). However, Castells' loyalties tend to lie with the late capitalist theories, arguing that informationalism reinvigorates capitalism by improving the flexibility of capitalist operations.

[9] For critical analysis of the increasing commodification of information, see Lacroix and Tremblay (1997), Lyon (1988), McChesney et al. (1998), and Winseck (1997).

[10] Herbert Schiller (1981, 1989, 1996), amongst others, has extensively documented this corporate colonization of the cultural sphere.

[11] Globalization in the broad sense involves the stretching of social relations and institutions across space and time (Giddens, 1998). As such, it should not be simply equated with economic

There is some evidence that economic globalization trends have been exaggerated (Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Weiss, 1998; Wood, 1998). However, it also seems clear that economic globalization has taken place and is increasingly challenging the economic autonomy of nation-states (Giddens, 1998:31; Held, 1996:345). No one nation-state is able to fully control the movement of capital, especially given the new 'borderless' communications networks of corporate organizations. Proponents of 'strong' economic globalization believe that it is leading to a weakening and even redundancy of the sovereignty of the nation-state (Horsman and Marshall, 1994; Ohmae, 1992; Reich, 1992). Luke (1996) argues that we are presently experiencing a 'new world disorder' in which routines of governmentality are in crises as globalization processes (particularly facilitated by flows of information) cause the dissolution of territoriality and the degradation of sovereignty.[12]

However, as Held (1996:342) notes, a weakening of economic (and political) autonomy does not necessarily translate into a generalized loss of state sovereignty, where the latter is seen as the entitlement to rule over a particular territory and population. While global markets may lead to less possibilities for state control over corporate dealings in the private economy, state regulation of individual and group sociation continues apace. In fact, the decreasing influence of states over economic activities may lead to an increasing interest by governments in the control of the lifeworld of populations. New Zealand's recently defeated centre-right government showed this tendency. While increasingly leaving economic affairs to the 'business community', it became obsessed with issues related to population control. Its 'security' measures included increasing the search powers of the secret service over citizens, heightening the surveillance and control of welfare recipients with 'dob in a beneficiary' and 'work for the dole' schemes, increasing the penalties for 'home invasions', tearing down motorbike gang fences, and banning the sale of marijuana pipes.[13]

Furthermore, administrative power should not be seen as simply bound to the territorial authority of nation-states. Such power can be enacted through local, national, and

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globalization. As well as the economic, it involves the spread and increasing interconnectedness of culture and politics.

[12] The globalization thesis is influenced by theories of information society and late capitalism. Luke for instance emphasizes the flows of information for which Castells is famous. As well as 'legitimate' multi-nationals, Luke (1996) refers to de-territorialized activities of 'contragovernmental resistances' including 'mafia potentates in New York, Asian crime gangs, Jamaican posses, Haitain toughs, Colombian drug lords, and Nigerian syndicates', all of which are 'exercising extraordinary levels of quasi-legitimate coercive and commercial power.'

[13] Security refers to governing processes that seek to ensure the general welfare of a population (safety, health, wealth, and so on). See Foucault's (1991) theory of governmentality.

international systems of *governance*. Nation-states, Giddens (1998:32-33) argues, now operate

> in active collaboration with one another, with their own localities and regions, and with transnational groups and associations. "Government" hence becomes less identified with "the" government – national government – and more wide-ranging. "Governance" becomes a more relevant concept to refer to some forms of administrative or regulatory capacities. Agencies which either are not part of any government – non-governmental organizations – or are transnational in character contribute to governance.

Administrative power is maintained and extended through inter-governmental cooperation and state-corporate alliances.[14] These political alliances are central to the globalization story. States, regions, and corporations are more than ever working together, if unequally, to ensure global *security* and *stability*.[15] Administrative power over populations is extended through the global economy, international political decision making, and international law.

While administrative power is extended through regional and global arrangements, the nation-state remains at the center of governance. As Giddens (1998:32) emphasizes in relation to increasing economic and cultural globalization,

> the nation-state is not disappearing, and the scope of government, taken overall, expands rather than diminishes as globalization proceeds. . . . [n]ations retain, and will do for the foreseeable future, considerable governmental, economic and cultural power, over their citizens and in the external arena.

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[14] The state should not be seen as merely an instrument of capitalist production, captured by the capitalist classes for the pursuit of their interests. The state has its own interest in sustaining the accumulation of capital (Foucault, 1991; Offe, 1984, 1985). Compromises and partnerships between states and corporations are largely motivated by their shared interest in capital accumulation. In the last couple of decades, these strategic alliances have increasingly been facilitated by the hegemony of free-market discourse within state administrations. In addition, market-driven global organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, OECD, and WTO, have helped to ensure the increasing universalism of capital while maintaining the sovereignty of states.

[15] Weiss (1998) emphasizes not only the adaptability of modern states to changing conditions but the variability of power amongst states. The latter point seems very important given the economic and military power of the United States at the turn of the millennium. Its continuing power can be demonstrated by pointing not only to its ability to influence military and economic affairs around the globe but the way in which it is able to explicitly and systematically ignore international and inter-governmental economic and military agreements (Chomsky, 1998). Other nations display their power by attempting to do the same on a smaller scale, depending on the case.

Habermas (1998a) agrees. While accepting much of the globalization argument, he argues that,

> The nation-state is still the most important political actor, and will continue to be such for a long time to come. It is impossible to part with it so quickly.

Administrative power, though re-configured, remains not only an important media for the coordination of material reproduction but continues to spill over into areas of symbolic reproduction, threatening the vitality of the lifeworld and the possibilities for democratic participation.

5.2.3 The Public Sphere in the Era of Consumer Society

Given the ongoing colonization of the lifeworld by money and administrative power we should expect to see, according to Habermas, the continuing degradation of the public sphere.[16] What is the evidence for this? What is the general state of the public sphere in liberal democracies?

The numerous reports of increasing disillusionment, apathy, and cynicism towards political participation in Western democracies may be interpreted as the result of system colonization of political life. Many liberal democracies are experiencing low levels of voter turnout, with the biggest democracy (United States) leading the way. Levels of confidence in politicians and interest in official political affairs are also steadily declining (Giddens, 1998:51). Aronowitz (1993:61) argues that these facts are symptomatic of a crisis facing liberal democracy (in contrast to Fukuyama's (1992) celebration of the triumph of liberalism). Yet, according to Giddens, a loss of faith in liberal democracy does not necessarily translate into a withdrawal from politics. Giddens, following Ulrich Beck, argues that the situation can be interpreted as a shift from old style parliamentary politics to 'sub-politics.' In other words,

> declining interest in party and parliamentary politics isn't the same as depoliticization. Social movements, single-issue groups, NGOs and other associations of citizens surely will play a part in politics on a continuing basis – from a local to a world level. Governments will have to be ready to learn from them, react

[16] Given system colonization, we could also expect, following Habermas, pathological effects in other domains of the lifeworld (social, cultural, and personality) manifested as anomie, loss of meaning, and mental illness. However, this prediction will not be followed up here as I am only considering the public sphere of the lifeworld.

> to the issues they raise and negotiate with them, as will corporations and other business agencies. (Giddens, 1998:53)

Over the last couple of decades 'postmaterialist' social movements, concerned with issues of identity and democratic representation, have not only achieved astounding political success but have done so partly through creating space outside state and corporate corridors for public deliberation. This justifies Habermas' (1987a) faith in the potential of such politics to enable an autonomous public sphere. Global communications networks have facilitated the growth of these groups and the development of a global civil society (visibly manifested in the November 1999 WTO protests in Seattle and subsequent actions against trans-national capitalism throughout 2000). These developments have stimulated wide ranging moral-practical discourse and constituted an international public sphere. However, not all of the new political activity contributes to an extension of the public sphere. On closer inspection, much of what Giddens and Beck identify as 'sub-politics' may be re-classified as the development of highly coordinated consumer groups mobilized to push through their particular demands, demands such as consumer protection laws, income tax cuts, home security legislation, and information privacy laws. Environmental, feminist, gay and lesbian, and other 'new social movements', have increasingly been forced to operate in this mode to be effective. Rather than a revived public sphere of individuals reflexively deliberating, every indication is that a non-deliberative and non-reflexive interest group politics has continued to dominate civic engagement (Aronowitz, 1993:62).

The dominance of narrowly defined interest politics supports the idea that an increasingly conservative global consumer society has arisen. People more and more see themselves, not as rational citizens of a deliberating public, but as part of this or that consumer group, even in relation to politics. The decline of public life in America in the latter part of the millennium has been consistently documented by the likes of Carey (1995) and Sennet (1977). A similar story is told in many other nations, their public spaces having been increasingly replaced by the shopping malls and easily consumed political spectacles of the postmodern (or post-civil) consumer society.

Postman (1985), along with Carey, Sennet, and others, highlights the increasing reduction of participation in public life to media consumption. Mass mediated communication should not be seen as a negative development *in itself*. In large, dispersed, modern, polities, the mass media offer an arena by which public deliberations can take place (Dahlgren, 1995; Thompson, 1995). At the same time, however, mass media have been over-run by various combinations of state and corporate interests. Habermas (1987a:389-391), going beyond the

one-sided culture industry thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer and the postmodern pessimism of the likes of Baudrillard, acknowledges this 'ambivalent potential' that the mass media hold in relation to the public sphere.[17] The mass media enable communication vital to fostering public opinion.

> They free communication processes from the provinciality of spatiotemporally restricted contexts and permit public spheres to emerge, through establishing the abstract simultaneity of a virtually present network of communication contents far removed in space and time and through keeping messages available for manifold contexts. (ibid:390)

Yet, as Habermas demonstrated in STPS and continues to argue, the mass media have been largely dominated by powerful state and corporate interests. This is supported by the mass communications research of critical political economists which convincingly demonstrates a continuing infiltration of the mass media by administrative and corporate power.[18] In a recent interview, Habermas (1998a:8) reiterated this theme:

> the political sphere forms part of a wider cultural sphere, and today both are linked directly to the soiled channels of private television. Public television is competing in a race to the bottom with the most degraded presentation and programming of commercial television.

Enthusiasts for electronic democracy point to this continuing degradation of mass mediated communications and the more general loss of public spaces to highlight the Internet's superiority as a democratic medium and cyberspace as a new place for conviviality.

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[17] Habermas (1987a:391) provides a summary of mass media research which shows the contradictory nature of the media in relation to the public sphere. The mass media both hierarchize and 'remove restrictions on the horizon of possible communication. The one aspect cannot be separated from the other—and therein lies their ambivalent potential. Insofar as mass media one-sidedly channel communication flows in a centralized network—from the center to the periphery or from above to below—they considerably strengthen the efficacy of social controls. But tapping this potential is always precarious because there is a counterweight of emancipatory potential built into communication structures themselves.' Despite being 'abstracted and clustered', mass media communications cannot be 'reliably shielded from the possibility of opposition by responsible actors' (ibid:390).

[18] Critical political economists of communication have in particular shown how corporate and state power have dominated the mass media. See Bagdikian (1997), Garnham (1990), Herman and Chomsky (1988), Herman and McChesney (1997), McChesney (1999), Mosco (1996), and Schiller (1969, 1989).

Rheingold (1993:6), for instance, laments the loss of public spaces. He argues that the

> commercial mass media, led by broadcast television, have polluted with barrages of flashy, phoney, often violent imagery a public sphere that once included a large component of reading, writing, and rational discourse. (ibid, 13-14)

This has led, he contends, to the commodification of the public sphere, 'substituting slick public relations for genuine debate and packaging both issues and candidates like other consumer products.' In contrast, Rheingold (1993:14) argues that

> [t]he political significance of CMC lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy.

Rheingold, along with other electronic democrats referred to in Chapter One, sees the Internet as capable of bypassing state and corporate media monopolies to revive the public sphere. Rather than 'a world in which a few people control communications technology that can be used to manipulate the beliefs of billions', the Internet offers 'a world in which every citizen can broadcast to every other citizen' (ibid:14). However, Rheingold, and other electronic democrats such as Hauben and Hauben (1997), also fear that cyberspace may fall prey to state and corporate control. I investigate these claims and fears in the rest of this chapter, starting with an overview of Internet history to contextualize the Net in relation to state and corporate interests.

5.3 History and Background to Internet Developments

A powerful mythology has developed around the 'early' Internet. According to the stories of Rheingold (1993), Hauben and Hauben (1997), and other 'Net enthusiasts', early Internet culture developed a public spirit of cooperation and community. They argue that, this stemmed from a combination of scientists sharing information, hobbyists sharing software, students chatting, community activists organizing, and ordinary people reaching out, hungry for community and civil society as informal public spaces disappeared from everyday life. According to Net enthusiasts, this corporate-free, state-free interaction promised to revive community and the public sphere, a promise that has now come under threat with increasing state regulation and commercialization. This nostalgic 'rise and fall' type story parallels Habermas' (1989) narrative of the bourgeois public sphere. In this section I will investigate

this story in order to determine the nature and extent of state and corporate influence over the Internet.[19] This account will provide the backdrop for my subsequent evaluation of the level of system colonization of online communicative spaces.

The Internet's predecessor ARPAnet was born out of a Cold War defence initiative. It was developed to enable geographically dispersed scientists involved in projects funded by the US Department of Defence's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to share data.[20] ARPA funded projects at various research institutes converged in the late 1960s and early 1970s to form the world's first distributed computer network. ARPAnet began with 4 'hosts' in 1969 but by 1983 had expanded to 4000.[21] Though initially intended to share data, electronic conversation (e-mail and computer conferencing) soon proved to be a useful and popular tool for the geographically dispersed scientists and government workers who had access to the network. Other distributed computer networks were developed by universities (Usenet with the involvement of Bell labs and MCI), government departments (NASA created NSInet) and commercial companies (Xerox, DEC, IBM, and AT&T) (Miller, 1996:46). With the development of protocols (particularly TCP/IP) for inter-network communication, many of these networks (notably Usenet) linked up with ARPAnet, which by 1983 had split from military operational use.[22] In 1986 the National Science Foundation created NSFnet linking new supercomputing centers in the United States (Baran, 1995a:75). This new high-speed, high-capacity 'backbone' network eventually replaced ARPAnet which was finally decommissioned in March 1990 (Rheingold 1993:84).[23] By this time the network had gone global. Not only had universities throughout the United States made the network accessible to their teachers and students but it had also been linked up to backbone computer networks that had developed in other countries. These backbone computer networks were predominantly academic and research networks such as JANET in the United

[19] There are many stories of the development of the Internet available that provide more thorough accounts than can be offered here. Rheingold's (1993) now classic *The Virtual Community* is still possibly the most entertaining and informative story of the early Internet available. Other useful Internet histories are provided by Abbate (1999) and Hafner and Lyon (1996).

[20] The United States has led the way in the development of the Internet and as such the story of the Internet's development will refer mostly to US developments, policies, and examples.

[21] Host computers are computers that have their own Internet address and are permanently and directly connected to the Internet. Hosts can be mainframe computers with several hundred users connected, or an individual PC with one user. Home or business users who connect to the Internet using a modem are not included in the host computer count.

[22] The Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) is a translator language allowing different computer systems to talk to one another (that is, to transfer data).

[23] A backbone is a continental or country network carrier providing connectivity to regional networks.

Kingdom and TuiaNet in New Zealand.[24] The 1990s has seen phenomenal expansion, with thousands of 'wide area networks' (schools, businesses, local governments, community organizations) from around the globe linking up to the network. With these connections the network has come to be known simply as the Internet, the network of computer networks.

It must be made clear that, despite the pervasive myth of a non-corporate early history, the Internet was not *purely* state funded and developed. Although the early Internet was not 'commercial in orientation, it is clear that commercial interests were instrumental in the medium's development' (Cunningham, 1998). Amongst research laboratories funded by ARPA to develop computer networking were: the RAND Corporation, a private think tank in Santa Monica that performed top secret studies for the Pentagon and developed packet switching under the guidance of Paul Baran; Bolt, Beranek, and Newman (BBN), a private computer consulting firm in Cambridge (MA) which ended up running key components of ARPAnet; and MIT which, with large funding from corporate interests, worked on time-sharing and the implementation of ARPAnet packet switching (Rheingold, 1993:70-76).[25] Other corporations were instrumental in the development of the present Internet. Xerox researchers designed local area networks (LANs) that now link computers within organizations to the Internet and also developed the first personal computer (Rheingold, 1993:77-78).[26] Bell Labs and DEC secured their place in the developing network due to their early association with, and funding of, the R&D of the Usenet system (Cunningham, 1998). Direct corporate participation in running the Internet came with NSFnet contracting out services to Merit Corp, MCI, and IBM, all of which led to these corporations involvement in the eventual commercial Internet and their leadership in the field of computer

[24] For a more detailed overview of the complex set of global backbone and smaller networks that joined to form the Internet, see Batty and Barr (1994:700-701). For a discussion of the development of New Zealand's backbone network, based upon linking universities and government research institutes, see Wiggins (1996).

[25] Packet switching architecture combines with TCP/IP to produce a genuine global decentralized network: the Internet. Whereas telephone calls are 'circuit-switched' – sent across a single dedicated circuit – Internet communication is 'packet switched.' This means that messages are divided into 'units' or 'packets' of data and passed through to the given destination via packet switches (or nodes) along the way. Different packets of a message can be sent along different routes of the decentralized network before being reassembled at the final destination. This allows for maximum efficiency and speed as data can be sent along the transmission lines that are free at the time a message is sent. This decentralized structure also makes the network reasonably indestructible, since communication can continue despite part of the system being down. If one 'node' is knocked out, messages are simply re-routed through others.

[26] Xerox researchers developed many of the key interface concepts of personal computing, 'such as the "desk-top", "files", "folders", "trash", the "pull-down menu", the "mouse", "point-and-click", and "windows"' (Aikens, 1997). Apple, Microsoft, and other computer software developers were to go on to make these innovations universal aspects of the personal computing and Internet experience.

networking (Miller, 1996:47). This corporate involvement, combined with that of the Department of Defense, make the Internet a typical example of American 'military industrial complex' synergy (Cunningham, 1998).

Actual privatization of the Internet began to take place from 1993 when the running and funding of the Internet was slowly transferred from the NSF to private corporations (Baran, 1995a:72; Rheingold, 1993:84-88). On April 30th 1995 NSFnet was finally decommissioned, the backbone infrastructure of high speed phone lines and related equipment being sold to America Online. The Internet is now almost entirely funded by private enterprises (such as MCI, AT&T, and BBN). These businesses operate as 'network service providers', selling access to large businesses, universities, government agencies and also to local Internet service providers (ISPs), from which small business and individuals in turn buy access (Baran, 1998:126-127). The US Government, along with other governments, is now essentially just another commercial customer (ibid).[27]

With privatization, the Internet has developed into a commercial venture. The virtual environment is now a commodity, marketed and metered out to network *consumers* (Stallabrass, 1995:20). In addition, much of cyberspace has turned into an online market. The 'acceptable use' policies that had ruled out commercial activity dissolved once the Internet began to privatize in 1993 (Rheingold, 1993:83). Such activity has since proliferated. The Internet is also being used extensively by businesses for internal communications and business-to-business communications, replacing reliance upon commercial telecommunications utilities (Breslow, 1997:252).

Despite privatization and commercialization, the notion that 'no one owns or controls the Internet' or that 'everyone owns and controls it' is still prevalent.[28] For instance, Cairncross (1997:95) asserts that 'nobody owns the Internet, runs it, maintains it, or acts as gatekeeper or regulator.' Selnow (1998:72) argues that '[n]obody owns it, nobody keeps its gates, nobody controls it, nobody regulates it, and therefore it suffers no limitations on who can access it or who can stock it with information.' This argument is drawn from a number of

[27] Reflecting trends around the world, the management of NZGate was in 1996 handed over to Netway and Clear Communications and responsibility for the allocation of domain names was transferred from the University of Waikato to the more commercially-oriented Internet Society of New Zealand (Wiggins, 1996).

[28] Many of the 'high powered' participants at the panel 'Who Owns the Internet?' at The Harvard Conference on *The Internet & Society* expressed the idea that either nobody or everybody owns and controls the Internet (see O'Reilly, 1997:449-463).

the technical aspects of the Internet. Such technical aspects include: that the TCP/IP protocol is a public computing language rather than a proprietary software and so is free for anybody to use without payment or license, that no single organization can control access or makes decisions about the Internet *as a whole*, and that distributed networking makes content control difficult.

However, these facts do not support the claim that the Internet is owned by no-one or even by every-one. One must consider the ownership and control of the infrastructure of the Internet: the telecommunication lines, connection points, computing facilities (including access to the servers with their memory capacity), and the management services. Although they are not owned by a *single* entity and there is no *central* command, they *are* owned and controlled by various organizations, corporations, governments and universities. The global transmission conduits – wires, optical fiber, and wireless – are increasingly owned by large corporations.[29] The access points and servers (storage facilities) are owned and controlled by computer companies, universities and governments.[30] The front end of all this is seen by the consumer in ISP charges. As well as the infrastructure, an Internet user must purchase computer networking software and hardware from companies who have the final say over design.

What about the technical management of the Internet? Those like Cairncross who promote the idea that no-one owns and controls the Internet believe that the few technical and administrative decisions that do have to be taken centrally are done so on a near voluntary basis by beneficent 'guardian' engineers and scientists.[31] The best support for this notion is the Internet Engineering Task Force, which is in charge of technical standards for emerging online technologies. It is a not-for-profit, voluntary organization, open to all, and based upon rough consensus decision making (Martin, 1996:9). But it is also part of the 'old guard' of the public Internet. With privatization things have been changing. This can be demonstrated by looking at the allocation of Internet addresses or 'domain names', using the United States as case in point (the story being similar elsewhere). The Domain Name

[29] Telecommunications globally is undergoing privatization – see further discussion in Section 5.5 below.

[30] Free storage (Net-space) and other network facilities (such as e-mail lists) are available for non-profit sites from Net companies such as Tripod and GeoCities, but at the 'cost' of hosting commercial advertising.

[31] Martin (1996) provides an overview of some of the organizations that have been involved in the running of the Internet. See Diamond (1998) for an account of the struggle over the control of domain names registration.

System (DNS) connects an Internet address like massey.ed.nz with the numerical IP address that identifies its host server.[32] Domain name allocation has been the responsibility of a "partnership" between the US Government (through NSF) and a private corporation, Network Solutions Inc (NSI) which is 'a major defence contractor owned by past and present big shots in various US defence and intelligence agencies' (Martin, 1996:11). NSI has been able to make huge profits from collecting 70% of the $50 annual fee that every domain name holder has been forced to pay since 1995. Revenues have been estimated to be over $40 million in 1997 and growing (Diamond, 1998).[33] Re-organization of the DNS, proposed by a US Commerce Department Green Paper of January 1998, will reduce US Government involvement while letting more firms in on the action (Diamond, 1998:176). As well as a money spinner, domain name allocation offers those involved a certain amount of control over the Internet. Diamond (1998:172) argues that '[t]o a large extent, whoever controls the DNS -- and the root server, the holy temple in which all names are housed -- also controls the Internet.' While the DNS accounts for only one aspect of the Internet, its vulnerability to centralized power illustrates the potential control that the US Government, NSI, and any new domain name allocaters have over individuals and groups attempting to publish their ideas on the Internet.[34]

The ongoing struggle for control of domain name registry reflects the jostling for Internet governance and ownership that has developed since the network's privatization. It is very difficult to determine the extent of ownership and control that any single player has or will have. It is safe to say, however, that not everyone owns and controls the Internet. The main players remain the large corporates, the US Government, and (to a lesser extent) other nation-state administrations.

[32] Each computer connected to the Internet is assigned a unique address called an 'Internet Protocol address' or 'IP address' which allows it to be identified when transferring or receiving information. Under the current system this consists of four numbers separated by dots, each ranging from 0 to 255, for example, 210.55.147.121. The Domain Name System is the system where the IP addresses are converted into domain names (although it is not necessary for an IP addresses to have a domain name). For instance, when www.example.co is entered by a user into an Internet browser a (somewhat hidden) process converts that name into an IP number. A domain registration service is also normally involved, funded by domain name fees.

[33] These substantial sums are due to the sheer numbers of applicants for domain names (each Internet host requires one). Until 1993 the number of domain names registered was between 200-300 a month; this rose to more than 3000 per day by 1998 (Diamond, 1998:172). The $40 million estimate is a conservative figure. Martin (1996:9) calculated NSI's revenue as exceeding $443 million each year.

[34] For recent commentary on the latest 'DNS wars', see Horvath (1999).

Throughout the 1990s the Internet continued to grow at a phenomenal rate. The US National Coordination Office for Computing, Information, and Communications estimates that between 1988 and 1998 the Internet has grown approximately 100% per year (number of nodes and people using it), with traffic growing at 400 precent per year.[35] The network has been continually expanded to avoid bottlenecks due to ever increasing usage. To provide for the expected demand in the twenty first century the Clinton Administration announced in 1996 the Next Generation Internet (NGI) initiative to develop Internet2, which is expected to increase the speed and capacity of the network by over a thousand times. Internet2 also fits in with a grander plan to make the Internet part of a universal broadband superhighway of fully integrated communications technologies that provide 'consumers' with a vast array of communications and information products including audio and video 'Webcasting' (Gates, 1995).[36] This notion is promoted by the US Government with its proposed Global Information Infrastructure (GII) initiative and by the European Commission with its 'information society' plans (Bangemann, 1995; Gore, 1994).[37] Although governments are involved in the initial stages of development, private corporations are expected to take up responsibility for much of the building and running of the network which will largely be based on the maximization of information age productivity (Bangemman, 1995; Gore, 1994; Yoshiba, 1995). The state's role is now mostly one of 'overseeing the construction of the so-called "information society"' (Lacroix and Tremblary, 1997:157).

This brief history of the Internet demonstrates that its ownership, control, and development have been consistently dominated by big capital and big government. What does this mean in terms of the possibility of the Internet facilitating open public deliberations free of instrumental action? In other words, following the system-lifeworld model, to what extent does the corporate and state control of the Internet translate into a dual colonization of communicative action in cyberspace by money and administrative power? I will investigate this question in the remaining sections of this chapter.

[35] See www.ngi.gov (last accessed 5/2/00). Estimated growth rates vary greatly depending upon the measuring criteria used. For instance, one can count the number of e-mail accounts, or the number of Websites, or the number of nodes connected to the Internet.

[36] The information superhighway was originally to be developed separate from the Internet. However, with its rapid expansion, the Internet has now become the centre of the vision of a global, high speed, integrated, information and communications network. See Baran (1995b) for more background to the original superhighway plans and developments.

[37] Other governments are developing national information infrastructures to link into the global information network vision but also to reflect their nation's circumstances and priorities. See Kahin and Wilson (1997).

5.4 Administrative Power and Cyberspace

Cyberspace is seen by some commentators as part of a globalization process in which state power seeps upwards towards global political agents (multi-nationals and the new supranational political formations) and downwards towards regional zones and even towards individuals, 'the new global citizens wired up to the Internet who, through the unintended consequences of their actions, are busily forming new patterns of sociality, new virtual communities and thus new bases of power' (Burrows, 1997:44). Such dispersal of power through cyberspace is seen as weakening nation-state influence. Rather than simply dispersing power to different sized geographical locations like a conduit, many believe that cyberspace disregards geographical boundaries and locations altogether. Luke (1996) contends that this de-territorialization undermines nation-state governing powers. However, both the operation of governance and of the Internet's part in it are misconceived here. First, as seen in section one of this chapter, present techniques of governance are not necessarily confined to physical geography. They concentrate upon populations rather than territories. Second, as will be seen below, the Internet actually advances, rather than undermines, new and efficient techniques of securing and policing geographically dispersed or dislocated populations. As well as a space for the development of individuals, local groups, and trans-national organizations, the Internet may also provide a means for the coordination, re-direction, and extension of nation-state power and techniques of governance.

At the same time as corporates have gained large measures of control over the Internet through its commercialization, privatization, and the deregulation of industries surrounding it, many governments have stepped up their efforts to influence and control their (and other) population's participation in cyberspace. The US *Telecommunications Act of 1996* is exemplary. On the one hand the industry de-regulation aspects of the act shifts much of the control the US Government has held into the hands of the industry (a point explored further in Section 5.5 below). On the other hand, a sub-section of the Act – the Communications Decency Act (CDA) – aims to increase control over citizen communications by making it a crime to post 'indecent, obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy' material on the Internet.

Nation-state administrations can both facilitate greater Internet participation and can 'police' or 'manage' this participation.[38] Governments are able to police activities in cyberspace

[38] Here the conception of administrative power (drawing upon Weber's understanding of calculative rationality and bureaucratic organization) overlaps with Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality, where populations are managed for their security and welfare through techniques whereby individuals become active in their own regulation.

through direct censorship, through the surveillance of online populations, and through influencing the technical design and deployment of the developing medium. Furthermore, governments are impinging upon public online discourse by promoting themselves through the Web and other Internet spaces.

The extent to which these four overlapping mechanisms of cybernetic governance (censorship, surveillance, control of technological form, and online publicity) limit the formation of public deliberation and the public sphere through cyberspace will be explored in this section. The public sphere requirement of the autonomy of individuals to freely deliberate is particularly threatened by the present activities of administrative powers and this is the central concern here.

5.4.1 State Censorship

With alarm bells ringing regarding cyber-pornography and cyber-terrorism, governments around the world are attempting to legislate to restrict Internet content and communications. These efforts have been met in most cases with fierce opposition from Internet enthusiasts who believe censorship threatens the celebrated freedom of expression at the heart of cyber-culture. Cyber-libertarians are at the forefront of this resistance. Take for instance the reaction to the passing of the US *Communications Decency Act* of 1996 (that has been subsequently overturned).[39] Cyber-libertarians were the main force behind the blue ribbon campaign that encouraged thousands of Website owners to blacken their sites in protest to the passing of the bill. They also promoted the e-mail bombardment of the White House e-mail system. Electronic Freedom Foundation founder John Perry Barlow (1996) expressed the sentiments of cyber-libertarians generally by declaring, rather melodramatically, the 'independence of cyberspace' from nation-states. This resistance to state control brings cyber-libertarians into conflict with more conservative liberals who want to 'clean up' cyberspace for families and commerce. Cyber-libertarians tend to see state interference as unnecessary, believing that cyberspace will evolve its own laws and forms of governance.[40]

[39] Although this was a US Act, it would have had major impact upon Internet content and activity in general given the dominance of US citizens online.

[40] Cyber-libertarians have often drawn on 'frontiers mythology' when arguing that cyberspace is developing democratically without government interference. For instance, Mitch Kapor (1993:53) of EFF writes that, 'Life in cyberspace is often conducted in primitive, frontier conditions, but it is a life which, at its best, is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentralized than hierarchical. It serves individuals and communities, not mass audiences . . . . In fact, cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and community.' For a classic document of cyber-libertarian American frontiers rhetoric, see Dyson et. al (1994).

Moreover, opposition to state censorship is not confined to cyber-libertarians. Left-leaning-critics, for whom human autonomy is central, are also concerned. In particular, they fear censorship aimed at limiting political deliberations and democratic discussion, as has already been officially undertaken by more authoritarian regimes like Singapore, China, and Burma.[41]

Efforts to bring about state censorship have run into a number of problems. In some cases censorship proposals have failed at the legislative and legal hurdles. An electronic censorship law covering the Internet introduced before the New Zealand parliament in 1994, *The Technology and Crimes Reform Bill,* languished in the select committee stage. The US *Communications Decency Act* of 1996 has, in its original form, been ruled unconstitutional by the supreme court, although a redrafting is in progress. In these cases governments have tended to fall back on existing censorship rules. The latter, however, are often of limited effect given their design for older, centralized broadcast media. In other cases, where Internet censorship laws have been enacted, they have not been able to be fully enforced. A closer examination of censorship attempts will demonstrate why this is so.

There are a number of ways of attempting censorship. Singapore and China are good examples to consider due to the fact that they welcome the economic benefits of the Internet while persistently trying to control content. Both attempt to maintain control through making ISPs filter out unwanted materials, limiting Internet 'pipelines' to the outside world, and restricting access.

Blocking data coming into a server is possibly the most popularly proposed method of Internet censorship. The idea is normally to make ISPs and Website owners responsible for censoring incoming material, often by employing a proxy server to filter the material before it is stored on a public server. Such 'self censorship' regulations effectively mean defining the ISP as a broadcaster or a publisher rather than as a common carrier (the latter being generally the case with the telephone, for example). Most countries have not finally implemented such requirements for one reason or another, even where there has been an intention to do so as in the United States and New Zealand. However, the Singapore Government has bought in this censorship regime via its 1996 Internet regulations that put

[41] By mid-1999 forty-five countries had placed restrictions on their citizens' access to the Internet. The countries most involved in Internet censorship and control were Belarus, Burma, Central Asia and the Caucasus, China, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Vietnam. See http://www.rsf.fr/uk/alaune/ennemisweb.html (last accessed 2/3/00).

the Ministry of Broadcasting in charge of the Internet. ISPs and Website owners in Singapore must take action to prevent 'objectionable' material, which is defined as

> content which threatens public security and national defence, racial and religious harmony and public morals. This includes "contents which tend to bring the Government into hatred or contempt, or which excite disaffection against the Government" and "contents which undermine the public confidence in the administration of justice." (Rodan, 1998:81)

Rodan (ibid) reports that Web pages and bulletin boards are being shut down or modified due to non-compliance with these rules.

Another way to censor Internet content is to block material before it comes into a server by limiting the public telecommunications lines out of and into a country. China has only four gateways connecting mainland computers to the rest of the Internet (Stout, 1998). This situation helps the Chinese Government directly search and block politically sensitive Websites and Internet content, including foreign news media (Erickson, 1998a; Ramo, 1998:36). The Singapore pipeline is also restricted. As well as the all phone lines being owned by the Government, Internet services are 'wholly in the hands of government-owned and government-linked companies' (Rodan, 1998:77).

Both Singapore and China try to block or restrict access to the Internet by strictly registering users with government authorities. In China, for instance, to get an Internet account requires paying a fee beyond the reach of most Chinese and registering with the police which means signing an intimidating-sounding agreement not to violate dozens of the authority's Internet rules (including not using the Net for anti-governmental activities) (Ramo, 1998:35). China has also cut off the Internet access of suspected dissidents (Erickson, 1998a). Burma's draconian military regime is exceptionally restrictive of Internet communications, 'imposing prison terms of up to 15 years for unauthorized possession of an Internet-capable computer' (Erickson, 1998b:44).

Although such measures block many sites and users from the Internet, they do not lead to *complete* success in censoring online communications. The fact that the Internet is a globally distributed network with thousands of nodes (possible access points) means that one can, given a certain amount of computer literacy, bypass censorship. A user can connect directly to an ISP beyond the censorship boundaries. In China, despite efforts to block

foreign ISPs, Internet users who can afford the telephone charges can circumvent censors by connecting through Hong Kong (Erickson, 1998a; Powell, 1997).[42]

This subversion of censorship has reinforced the popular argument that the Internet interprets censorship as damage and routes around it. Here the term 'the Internet' must be understood to mean not just the technology but also the users involved, users whose determination to find new ways of expressing themselves drives them to circumvent censorship.

The sheer quantity of communication taking place through the Internet also makes censorship very difficult. This problem was central to the disabling of proposed legislation in New Zealand. *The Technology and Crimes Reform Bill* of 1994 proposed 'hefty fines and confiscation of equipment from anyone who broadcasts, transmits, communicates or receives "objectionable material" over their system' (McDonald, 1995). This proposal, however, threatened to force the operators of New Zealand's main Internet gateway at the time, Waikato University, to shut down due to the prohibitive costs of screening all the data being transmitted (ibid).

The limits to direct censorship of Internet communications is demonstrated by recent international events. The Malaysian Government, despite its strict control of the press, could do little about the outbreak of 'alternative' news and discussion on Web pages and Bulletin boards regarding the arrest of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. Distrusting the state controlled press, Malaysians flocked in their thousands to Internet sites run from both inside and outside the country to read news and discuss the issues (Erickson, 1998b; Hiebert, 1998). In Indonesia, despite strict state controls over the news media, students in May 1998 were able to communicate over the Internet from public Internet stalls and cafes to organize protests to bring down President Suharto (Erickson, 1998b:44). Other examples of political groups using the Internet to communicate and organize politically despite government imposed media censorship include the Turkish Kurds, the Chaipas in Mexico, and opposition groups in Yugoslavia. The increasing number of such examples of the failure of direct censorship supports the belief that the Internet helps undermine state power. However, there are other techniques of governance facilitated by cyberspace that need to be investigated. In particular, state surveillance is extended through the Internet and provides an alternative mechanism for censorship.

[42] China is attempting to block access to outside ISPs, including Web-based e-mail services like Hotmail (Erickson, 1998b:49).

5.4.2 Internet and State Surveillance

Civil libertarians like Simon Davies (1992), critical media theorists like David Lyon (1994), and postmoderns like Poster (1995, especially p78), all believe that there is a more ominous threat to democracy than *direct* state censorship of online content: the threat that the Internet will be caught in a web of state surveillance. This is not just an Orwellian conspiracy theory. For a variety of reasons governments around the world, from Singapore to the United States to New Zealand, are undertaking cyber-veillance.[43] This is not a radically new phenomenon. Data-veillance has been a central part of modern administrative practices of nation-states (and corporations) for some time (Giddens, 1985:178). More than 15 years ago Giddens (1985:309) observed the increasing use of information and communications systems for such surveillance practices:

> Administrative power now increasingly enters into the minutiae of daily life and the most intimate of personal actions and relationships. In an age more and more invaded by electronic modes of storage, collation, and dissemination of information, the possibility of accumulating information relevant to the practice of government is almost endless. Control of information can be directly integrated with the supervision of conduct in such a way as to produce a high concentration of state power.

The Internet now allows for an extension of this surveillance and the control of populations. As people's interactions move online, they shift from face-to-face interactions that are difficult to effectively and efficiently monitor (the need for electronic bugs and cameras, human undercover agents, and so on) to spacial interactions that are already wired up.

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) has become a popular starting point for critical theorists attempting to understand the Internet's role in extending the practices of governance through electronic surveillance. Foucault showed how Jeremy Bentham's 'panopticon' - a prison designed for the reform of inmates through constant surveillance by an unseen yet 'all seeing' guard - has been a model for social control and discipline in other

[43] New Zealand's previous National Government undertook a limited monitoring of its citizens' online communications. Department of Internal Affairs officers scoured Usenet groups and other online computer conferences for child pornography, tracking down and prosecuting suppliers. Publicised cases aimed not only to let would be offenders know they are being watched but also to assure the general public of the government's moral fibre. This approach was contradicted by the National Government's claims that 'the new electronic media' are too difficult for a small country to regulate and control, a claim often made in support of deregulatory moves. The new Labour Government, voted into office late in 1999, is considering plans for more extensive and intensive surveillance of Internet communications.

modern institutions, such as factories, schools, barracks and hospitals (Lyon, 1994:62-64). Central to Foucault's understanding of the panopticon, as Poster (1995:67-69) shows, is that it developed a system of discipline in which positive power allowed the 'reform' rather than simply the repression of prisoners. Knowing that they are constantly being monitored, prisoners, students, patients, and so on, watch their own behaviour and carry out self-regulation, internalizing institutional power and enabling their identities to be (re)constituted as desired by the authorities.

This disciplinary mechanism is, according to Poster (ibid), Lyon (1988:97-99), and Robins and Webster (1989:215), radically extended by computer networks, including the Internet, which loom as an 'electronic-panopticon' that can invisibly and continuously monitor citizen behaviour. An ISP, or anyone with access to the ISP server, can technically monitor all messages passing through. A person's activities online can be followed in great detail and accumulated into databases, either via *intelligence* (human) agents or via *intelligent* agents (information gathering programmes).[44] The information gathered can be combined (data-spliced) with other sources to build identity profiles of individuals. These virtual identities can have a very real effect on people's lives, on their credit ratings, immigration possibilities, job prospects and so on. The most powerful aspect of this development is *not* that one may be bombarded with direct marketing or that an authority can track down certain individuals. Rather, it is that people, knowing they are being watched, begin to monitor their own behaviour. As such, computer networks can work as a 'super-panopticon' (Poster's term) enabling a subjective internalization of institutional power, causing people to act and think in ways expected of them.

Such Internet surveillance provides for an effective and efficient system of censorship when compared to attempts to directly block sites and users. Knowing that they may be watched, participants in cyber-interactions become 'willing' subjects of their own censorship, taking care of what they say, hear, and look at. This can undermine democratic interaction. People become less likely to put forward rational critical arguments that are outside of what is deemed acceptable by the monitoring authority. Instead of being open and autonomous, public spaces come under a coercive cloud – a colonization of communicative action by administrative power.

[44] For more details on the use of intelligent agents, see the discussion of corporate surveillance in Section 5.5.3.

Singapore is an exemplary case of the use of electronic surveillance to enforce state censorship laws. On the one hand, Singapore's authoritarian government embraces the promise of capitalist economic power through computer networks, including the Internet. The vision is for Singapore to become the hub of global electronic communications – an 'intelligent Island' of post-industrial capitalist prosperity. The Government's *IT2000* plan includes connecting every household to a broadband coaxial and fiber optic network, including Internet connection (Rodan, 1998). At the same time it is bent on enforcing strict media censorship, including restrictions against publishing views opposed to those of the Government. To achieve this censorship in relation to the Internet, the Singapore Government has combined the direct censorship attempts described above with the use of surveillance techniques. In 1994, Rodan (1998) reports, it conducted a scan of GIF (Graphical Interchange Format) files on public Internet accounts held by a particular ISP. Although only five of 80,000 files were classified as objectionable (as pornographic), the search convincingly demonstrated the ability and willingness of the Government to carry out unannounced Internet searches and to monitor its citizen's online activities. Such tactics seem to have worked well for the Government: Singapore's Internet users have developed a strong belief that their government regularly monitors individuals on the Internet (Rodan, 1998). This belief is fuelled by 1996 regulations which require ISPs to keep information on subscribers to assist with any investigations. In addition, 'all political parties and religious organizations, and other organizations and individuals with Web pages discussing religion or politics' must be government registered and stick closely to the limits of political comment allowed by the Government (Rodan, 1998:81). Whether widespread surveillance is taking place is not the point. It is the belief amongst citizens that the authorities are able and willing to carry out such surveillance that effects the electronic panopticon. Citizens exercise self-surveillance along the lines of what is officially acceptable behaviour for fear of being watched by the authorities. Government secrecy on what sites it deems inappropriate fuels this self-surveillance and operates to silence opposition.

The Singapore Government's approach has been met with enthusiasm by other ASEAN nations who (with the exception of the Philippines) have agreed to find ways to collaborate to control Internet communication flows, including those involving political activities (Rodan, 1998:87). Authoritarian regimes in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam have already attempted to emulate the Singaporean model through techniques of political intimidation and monitoring (Hiebert, 1998). The Chinese Government has sent information officials to Singapore to learn about Internet policing (Rodan, 1998:87). It has created a particularly extensive electronic panopticon: multiple officials monitor Internet traffic on the restricted pipelines of *ChinaNet;* potential Internet users have to sign accounts with the police; and

'dissident activity' through the Internet is being punished by arrest, the closure of Internet accounts, and/or the confiscation of computers (Erickson, 1998a).

The efforts by Singapore and China have been the most explicit attempts yet to control information flows. Still, complete success has proved elusive. There are multiple reports of holes in China's defences against 'spiritual pollution' (Erickson, 1998a; Powell, 1997; Stout, 1998). The Singapore Government has resorted to offline and online rebuttals to 'misinformation' posted online (Rodan, 1998). Software developments are also making it easier to communicate anonymously. Anonymous postings are achieved by disguising the origin of messages. A popular way of doing this is to use an 'anonymous remailer' which passes on a message without trace of the author's online origins (normally a pseudonymous address is added that indicates the message is anonymous). By this means political discussion can be carried out without authorities being able to track the offline identities involved. For instance, Anonymizer.com, a leading online privacy service, launched the Kosovo Privacy Project in March 1999 in response to requests from the human rights community for a service that would provide Serbs and other groups with the chance to report on the situation in Kosovo. The project has provided anonymous e-mail and anonymous access to information and discussions.[45]

Internet surveillance and the direct censorship of political discussion are *presently* having only a limited impact upon the critical debate and public opinion formation in cyberspace.[46]

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[45] See http://www.anonymizer.com/kosovo (last accessed 5/1/00).

[46] Western nation-states are now developing what may prove to be much more effective Internet surveillance systems than has so far been the case. The Russian Government is the first to implement a comprehensive system. In January 2000 its System for Operational-Investigative Activities-2 (SORM-2) was authorized. 'Under the SORM-2 regulation all Internet service providers (ISPs) are required to install a "box", rerouting device, and a high speed communications line to hot-wire the provider to FSB [the successor to the KGB] headquarters. A warrant from a court is still needed for agencies to read any of the contents of the messages – though human rights groups suspect this may be by-passed' (Cited from statewatch, see http://www.statewatch.org/news/jun00/rip3.htm – last accessed 10/8/00). The US Government has been involved in national and international electronic surveillance more than any other nation. The FBI's latest technology to help with its Internet surveillance is the Carnivore programme which will sit in an ISP's system and filter all traffic crossing that ISP and sending random material to Bureau agents. One of the major problems for such a system is the use of unbreakable encryption programmes. The US Government has for some time been exploring how to overcome such encryption, both through regulation and by developing encryption breaking technologies. The United States is also concerned to monitor Internet communications outside its borders. An EU-FBI surveillance system is being developed that will link the interception of telecommunications throughout European with US intelligence (to be distinguished from the US Echelon spy network based in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand). In Europe, the major hurdle is to institute the legal powers for the interception of EU-wide telecommunications. The European Commission signed a document, the Convention on Mutual Assistance in criminal matters, on May 29 2000 requiring Member States and telecommunications service providers to develop a secure system for the interception of telecommunications. This

Research by Hill and Hughes (1998) shows that the Internet offers a relatively safe place for anti-government discussions and protests. To totally censor communication over the Internet and the alternative networks linked to it would require a shut down of the whole telecommunications network in the locality concerned. This is neither economically nor politically viable, and soon it may be technically impossible given developments in online privacy software and satellite transmission. There are, however, other less apparent forms of administrative power operating through the Internet threatening to limit online democratic interaction. In particular, government administrations influence Internet use through design and development initiatives.

5.4.3 State Influence through 'Writing' the Internet

The 'writing' (that is, the design and development) of the Internet's 'form', has been strongly influenced by the aims of administrative power, particularly through US Defence Department funded 'scientific' and 'military' research and development.[47] This moulding of the Internet's form by administrative power has implications for its possible uses, including for public discourse. To date, the form of the Internet has been surprisingly conducive to democratic interaction. Though developed to satisfy the needs of scientific and military communication, the decentralized, two-way communications network has accommodated and adapted to public interaction. However, the Internet's form may not remain so amenable to democratic uses given that its development is dominated by administrative power and corporate interests. While private corporations are now largely 'writing' Internet technologies outside of direct government research and development initiatives, the developing network continues to be under the influence of administrative power, particularly that of the US Government, through local research and development funding, government regulations, and global development initiatives. These three aspects of government influence are having significant impact upon the Internet's discursive spaces.

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convention is now simply waiting for formal ratification by the 15 EU parliaments. See documents at http://www.statewatch.org (last accessed 10/8/00). EU member states are presently amending their own interception of telecommunications laws to include the requirements specified by the EU's convention. For instance, Britain's *Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill* introduced to parliament on 9 February 2000 provides for extensive new powers of surveillance of telecommunications and the Internet communications including the interception of data flows, the power to demand communications data, and the power to order the handing over of encryption 'keys.' See http://www.uk-legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts2000/20000007.htm (last accessed 27/7/00). It has yet to be seen how these new surveillance systems will impact upon democratic participation over the Internet.

[47] Given its leadership in network development, it is the US Government's strategies and activities that are of central consideration when looking at state influence of Internet use through the 'writing' of the media-technology.

The Internet's form is being influenced by the US Government through research and development initiatives such as the Next Generation Internet (NGI) project. As was the case with ARPAnet, the NGI and related computer network projects are motivated by US national security concerns (ARPA is also involved in the NGI). Central to the NGI's aims is 'national security' – the NGI will provide the US with '"dominant battlefield awareness," which will give the US military a significant advantage in any armed conflict.' This military aspect of national security is accompanied in NGI plans by population 'welfare' applications: 'health care', 'distance education', 'energy research', 'biomedical research', 'environmental monitoring', and 'manufacturing engineering.'[48] Welfare, of course, is an important dimension of security.[49] A healthy, efficient, educated, and compliant population is a secure one. Welfare, and thus national security, is above all to be achieved through wealth creation.[50] Schiller (1969, 1995b) shows that the US Government's interest in the mass media and, more recently, in developing computerized communication systems is largely motivated by bolstering American global economic dominance.[51] The NGI fits this pattern. It is expressly an initiative to boost US economic superiority in the information and communications field. As NGI documents state,

> The NGI will foster partnerships among academia, industry, and governments (Federal, state, local, and foreign) that will keep the U.S. at the cutting-edge of information and communications technologies. . . . The NGI program is essential to

[48] See NGI homepage at www.ngi.gov (last accessed 5/2/00).

[49] Foucault's (1991) work on governmentality develops this link between security and welfare.

[50] The major threat to US (and other countries') 'national security' is now seen as lying in the economic sphere.

[51] The dominance of the United States in computer networking gives new life to Schiller's (1969, 1976) economic imperialism thesis. Internet discourse, from e-commerce to e-sex, is dominated by American language and cultural practices. As a result, there is growing fear that the Internet will lead to a loss of cultural diversity (the death of languages in particular) and to cultural impoverishment (Erickson, 1998c). Against this imperialism thesis, some commentators argue that the Internet is actually anti-imperialist as it allows free communication amongst free individuals and as a result fosters diversity – see, for instance, the panel discussion of *The Harvard Conference on Internet and Society* in O'Reilly (1997:467-482). However, Schiller's (1995b) evidence for American imperialism being extended through new computer networking initiatives is largely supported by US Government NGI documents. This cultural imperialism threat is also being taken seriously by the governments of France, China, and Singapore, who are trying (largely in vain) to resist Americanization through the Internet (Erickson, 1998c). The technology *could* be designed and utilized to foster diversity. However, this is unlikely at present due to the domination of Internet developments and online culture by particular 'voices.'

> sustain U.S. technological leadership in computing and communications and enhance U.S. economic competitiveness.[52]
>
> The potential economic benefits of this initiative are enormous. Because the Internet developed in the United States first, American companies have a substantial lead in a variety of information and communications markets. The explosion of the Internet has generated economic growth, high-wage jobs, and a dramatic increase in the number of high-tech start-ups. The Next Generation Internet initiative will strengthen America's technological leadership, and create new jobs and new market opportunities.[53]

NGI research is contracted out to, and thus subsidises the work of, American private networking industries. This is in line with previous US Internet research funding. The US Government, as shown earlier, has directly pumped millions of dollars into private corporations during the development of the Internet, sponsoring research that would have been too costly or risky for business to undertake. As a result, Internet research and development has been driven by a combination of government and industry interests. The combination has been largely complementary, given that the US Government's aims of wealth creation through capital accumulation parallels the motivations of private industry.

The continuing influence of government, as well as the complementarity of government and private industry goals for the future of the Internet, are further highlighted by legislation bearing upon Internet developments. The US Government is not only mitigating the risks involved in research and development, but also taking various regulatory steps to ensure that cyberspace emerges as a space for capital accumulation. According to Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) commissioner Susan Ness (1997), the Government can have a positive role in the 'emerging digital marketplace' by protecting 'consumer rights', supporting Internet commerce (for example, through copyright and libel laws), and facilitating industry competition through liberalization on a national and international level, ensuring that 'this global network of networks' is allowed to 'flourish unbridled by a crazy quilt of conflicting regulations.' Ira Magaziner (1998), a Clinton Internet adviser, reiterates the same limited role for the Government. As well as ensuring against violation of 'general antitrust laws . . . . the role of government here is to try to set a predictable global legal

[52] Quoted from the NGI Implementation Plan, Feb 1998 (refer NGI URL above).

[53] Quoted from the NGI Initiative Background Material, Oct 1996 (refer NGI URL above).

environment in a market-driven sector where buyers and sellers come together freely to make deals. . . . [including] protections for trademarks, copyrights and patents.' The *Telecommunications Act of 1996* is one outcome of this strategy. One side of the Act opens up markets to increased competitions (and corporate mergers) while the other (the *Communications Decency Act*, as discussed above) attempts to clean up cyberspace in order to encourage maximum participation in online commerce (Breslow, 1997:237). So, while the Government is undertaking a certain amount of de-regulation, its intentions and actions are far from libertarian. The US Government is prepared to strongly regulate where necessary to ensure a 'safe' competitive market. Government regulation concerns so far have focused upon sanitizing cyberspace (morally and politically) for mainstream commerce; protecting electronic commerce (securing property rights and electronic money transactions); and intervening (when absolutely necessary) in corporate affairs in order to increase market competition, as was the case in Judge Jackson's (7/7/00) ruling to break up Microsoft.

The extension of such domestic initiatives to the international level is necessary for the United States to maximize its global economic advantage. The concept of the Global Information Infrastructure (GII) has been one mechanism by which the US Government has attempted to promote the Internet and other electronic communications as a de-regulated information market (Gore, 1995). Many governments, sold on globalization theories, neo-liberal economics, and information economy rhetoric, are already in line with the US Government's objectives. As well as the censorship and surveillance of undesirable online activity, many governments are encouraging private investment in Internet developments through planning initiatives, liberalization policies, low interest loans, tax incentives, and by sponsoring and undertaking commercially risky research and development (see UNCTAD, 1995).

Through these various development initiatives and regulatory moves to maximize wealth (welfare and security), administrative power is contributing to the 'writing' of the Internet along commercial lines. The form of the Internet and thus its possible uses are being structured towards the making of efficient workers and passive consumers. However, as demonstrated by the early history of the Internet, many developments actually take place outside 'big' government and corporate control, and these can ultimately become integral to the form of the evolving technology. Moreover, any technological artefact holds unforseen potentials and unintended uses. The Internet was developed by the US 'military-industrial complex' for a limited range of data sharing and communications purposes and yet quickly

became used for many unintended goals, including those of deliberative interaction.[54] The 'writing' of the Internet is such that it allows participants to 'read' or use it in various ways, including for public deliberation. This should be the case for some time to come. Even with the various government-corporate initiatives outlined above, there is continuing demand for interactive systems like e-mail, chat, and bulletin boards. The low cost publishing of the Web also allows for a multiplicity of voices. However, there is yet another mechanism by which administrative power could threaten democratic participation: the infiltration of representative publicity into cyberspace.

5.4.4 Online Representative Publicity: Big Government and Big Politics in Cyberspace

National and local governments around the world are developing an explicit online presence.[55] They are transferring public information onto the Internet and providing feedback systems (e-mail, online transactions, consultations). A few have gone as far as to provide public discussion spaces where citizens can interact with each other and with government officials.[56]

A useful example to illustrate online government initiatives is Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network (PEN), begun in 1989, and often cited by electronic democrats as a successful model for other cities to follow.[57] Citizens of Santa Monica are provided free accounts to the system. This allows them to access the network from a home computer or from free terminals placed in libraries and shopping malls. Citizens are able to read public

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[54] Rheingold (1993, especially 67-71) gives multiple examples of the officially developed Internet technology being appropriated for ends other than those intended. The first historical example of this is possibly the use of ARPAnet by scientists to exchange personal chat as well as to communicate their scientific research (Ogden, 1994:716).

[55] For further discussion of various government initiatives, see Ostberg and Clift (1999). Refer to Tsagarousianou (1998) for a number of excellent evaluations of city networks.

[56] Local government online initiatives, sometimes called CityNets or CivicNets, often have quite a different focus from their central government counterparts. Their aims and subsequent services tend to be more oriented towards community participation. While central government sites tend to be designed and run strictly with the goals of the incumbent government in mind, local government initiatives are often shaped by conflicting interests: citizens, city councillors, city managers, corporate sponsors, and electronic democracy enthusiasts. As a result, these initiatives may be torn between political, community participation, and economic goals. The balance depends on the political culture driving the projects. For instance, the Wellington InfoCity Project (http://www.wcc.govt.nz/wcc/infocity/) under the direction of a politically centre-right council, is driven more by liberal market and information society goals than by participatory ones. The IperBolE project (http://www.comune.bologna.it/) of Bologna, a city steeped in strong democratic traditions, has more democratic aims (Tambini, 1998; Aurigi and Graham, 1998). All sites last accessed 7/10/99.

[57] See, for instance, Dutton (1996) and O'Sullivan (1995). For Santa Monica's PEN, see http://pen.ci.santa-monica.ca.us/cm/index.htm (last accessed 7/7/00).

information placed on the city's database (including access to electronic forms), communicate with city officials, elected representatives and other citizens by e-mail, and participate in computer conferences on issues of local concern (Doctor and Dutton, 1998). The system has been seen as highly successful, especially in its early stages, in fostering democratic discussion on public issues through its computer conferencing facility. One success story that has now reached mythical status within the electronic democracy literature is the use of the network by the city's homeless population to organize and successfully lobby for public shower facilities, bathrooms, laundromats, and lockers (Varley, 1991). However, as Doctor and Dutton (1998:147) note, the deliberative aspects of the system were neither intended nor what the city council now wants to pursue. In addition, the deliberative aspects are not being taken up by councils emulating Santa Monica's PEN.

> From the city's perspective, the most promising components of PEN are the broadcasting and transactions component of the system, not the interactive elements designed to foster electronic democracy, and the city is interested in building on these components. Many other cities have emulated aspects of PEN, particularly its use of broadcasting and conducting simple transactions, some of which involve E-mail. Local government enthusiasm for the Internet, as with most other organisations, is focussed on the World Wide Web and its potential for broadcasting. (ibid)

This focus upon broadcasting and electronic transactions 'fits' the 'consumer' model of politics promoted by the liberal-individualist discourses dominating many governments. Hacker and Todino's (1996) study of the White House citizen e-mail communication system highlights this orientation. Their study shows how a liberal-individualist economic model is used as a blueprint for US Government online.[58] Other government online efforts also employ this consumer model of politics, emphasizing the opportunity for individuals to 'shop' around for the government information and services they require. In such approaches, subjects are constituted as clients or consumers rather than citizens. The deliberative possibilities made available by the Internet have generally not been taken up. Rather, the Internet (and the Web in particular) is being employed by government as a way to improve the efficiency of the systems already in place. Most governments are merely providing the

[58] On 24 June 2000, President Clinton and Vice President Gore announced via Webcast major new 'E-Government initiatives.' These initiatives remain driven by the goal of providing an array of information for individual choice. See http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/New/html/e-government.html (last accessed 7/7/00).

electronic equivalents of their offline services: information provision, electronic forms for making submissions and completing transactions, and formula replies to e-mail inquires.[59]

The provision of government information and services online also tend to be structured to promote the position of those in power. This involves what Habermas calls representative publicity. The Internet is often celebrated for bringing government and politicians directly to the people, providing unmediated access to public policy papers, speeches, news releases, and even interaction with representatives. However, this unmediated communication also offers the chance for those in power to 'stage' themselves directly before individuals. Again, the US Government leads the way in developing online representative publicity. The Clinton administration was one of the first governments to promote itself online via a Web presence. On the White House home page can be found selected speeches by the President, a list of his accomplishments, and photographs of the Clinton family (the President is promoted as your everyday American man, concerned with community and family).[60] In November 1999, President Clinton held the first ever live 'Presidential Internet Chat.' This online event was promoted as a democratic breakthrough but amounted to no more than a publicity stunt. Of the 30,000 users that logged in, 'only 27 were able to get their questions answered, and those only after their questions were triple-screened' (Weise, 2000).

Most governments now have a 'presence' online. Some governments have shown considerable creativity in the use of the Internet for representative publicity. The Singapore Government launched its Website to promote a positive image of Singapore business and government, as part of a strategy to combat 'misinformation' on the Internet (Rodan, 1998).[61] Another aspect of this strategy has involved ruling party members actively rebutting such 'misinformation' on Internet discussion groups related to Singapore issues. In Burma, online political staging has even been used to cover abuses of civil rights. 'After detaining hundreds of members of the opposition National League for Democracy,

[59] The British Government Internet site is a rare example of a national government providing discussion forums. See http://www.number-10.gov.uk/default.asp?pageid=7 (last accessed 20/4/00). Discussion forums are more often provided by city councils. Santa Monica PEN (URL above) is a famous example. Others include the Bologna IperBolE project (URL above) and London's Brent Council – see http://www.democracy.org.uk/brent/index.htm (last accessed 20/9/99). However, as Hale et al. (1999) show, only a small number of city and municipal networks actively encourage citizen deliberation.

[60] The Clinton administration also offers the ability to e-mail the President and Vice-President, but this is no more than an alternative form of traditional mail and not a democratic advancement. See Hacker and Todino (1996) for further discussion of this facility.

[61] See http://www.sg/infomap/ (last accessed 3/1/00).

Myanmar's junta . . . used a state tourism Socio- to post pictures of detainees watching TV and eating as "invited guests" at "government guesthouses"' (Erickson, 1998b:47). Not only government administrations, but also political parties, politicians, and interest groups throughout the world are using the Internet for self-promotion and to seek out potential supporters. Few, however, have taken their online activities to the extent of The Cyberparty of Korea which uses the Internet as its central means of publicity.[62]

The marketing of online political personalities and positions fits in with the consumer model. Individuals are asked to choose between the competing political options. Such moves have the potential to result in a colonization of public life even more insidious than that advanced by corporate marketing. While commercial advertising explicitly aims at the private consumer, representative publicity addresses the subject of the public sphere, that is, people who see themselves participating as citizens.[63] Political opinion management allows strategic rationality to enter the public sphere under the guise of openness.

However, this form of colonization by administrative power is limited. The Internet allows individuals to read, publish, and engage in extensive information gathering and critical debate outside of (and putting into question) government representative publicity. Thousands of people throughout the world disseminate information and discuss issues through a myriad of citizen organized bulletin boards (particularly Usenet groups), Websites, e-mail lists, and IRC channels. As shown earlier, this public deliberation takes place online even where strict state controls over mass media exist. In addition, cyber-resistance to online opinion management is proliferating. For instance, government and party Websites are often mirrored by parody sites, e-mail 'bombed' ('spammed') and consistently broken into, defaced, and rewritten by Internet hackers.[64]

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[62] For The Cyberparty of Korea, see http://cyberparty.or.kr/ (last accessed 26/4/99). Parties are also using their sites as bases to educate and organize their loyal supporters in election campaigning. For further discussion on the use of the Internet in political campaigning, especially in relation to the 1996 US elections, see Selnow (1998).

[63] As Schneider (1997:29-30) notes, the state's more insidious take over (in comparison to corporate colonization) of the public sphere was pointed to by Habermas in STPS. Habermas (1989:129) observes that while the press, from its beginnings, differentiated commercial advertising from public affairs with a 'classifieds' section it did not do the same with the presentation of political power which was fused from the start with the reporting of public affairs.

[64] See Warnick (1998) for an evaluation of political parody sites. Stories of politically motivated hacking can be found on the Politics Online archives at http://www.politicsonline.com/archives/intnews/ (last accessed 20/7/99).

Overall, governments are not yet taking full advantage of the Internet for either extending representative publicity or expanding democracy. On the one hand, governments are failing to utilize the democratic potential of the Internet. Online systems tend to replicate offline government systems without fully utilizing the Net's interactive capabilities. On the other hand, the politically powerful are failing to fully utilize the publicity opportunities offered by the Internet. This, of course, may all change as governments become more technologically savvy and as the Internet develops more multi-media, mass broadcasting capabilities, as will be further explored below.

5.4.5 Administrative Power in Cyberspace: Some General Conclusions

Administrative power is to various degrees infiltrating cyberspace through censorship, surveillance, the 'writing' of technology, and public opinion management. However, it does not at present completely debilitate communicative rationality online. Censorship and surveillance are being widely practiced by governments but there are various ways of avoiding these mechanisms. Public opinion management through the Internet is currently limited somewhat, although it may become a greater threat to rational deliberation online in the future as powerful political interests learn to take greater advantage of the medium for publicity and as the Internet integrates with mass broadcasting. Possibly the biggest problem for an autonomous online public sphere is the influence of administrative power over the design and implementation of the Internet technology. And yet even this 'writing' of the technology does not mean that online interaction is crippled by a colonization of administrative power. The way the technology is 'written' has, at present, considerable interpretative flexibility. It can be 'read' (used and adapted) by participants in various ways, including for public deliberation. Thus, we can conclude that although administrative power is very much a major player in cyberspace, it has not yet achieved a full colonization of communicative action by instrumental rationality. A degree of autonomy from state power can be, and is, maintained within cyber-deliberations.

Habermas' system-lifeworld thesis also points to another threat to the spaces of communicative rationality online: the colonization of cyber-interactions by the delinguistified medium of money. Corporate interests, intent on turning cyberspace into a commercially successful venture, have taken over much of the running, funding, and administration of cyberspace. As seen above, this corporate takeover has been undertaken with the blessing and support of administrative power. Western governments, aiming to encourage wealth creation and influenced by free-market discourse, have been encouraging this development by subsidizing research, de-regulating relevant industries, legislating for commercial property rights, and cleansing cyberspace of 'elements' that may threaten online

commerce. Many Internet-democracy enthusiasts, including Hauben and Hauben (1997), Moore (1999), and Rheingold (1993), worry that this increasing corporate control and commercialization of the Internet will destroy democratic cyberspace. Such worries clearly deserve careful consideration.

5.5 The Colonization of Cyberspace by Capital

To what extent does corporate control and commercialization translate into a destructive colonization of online discourse by money? This question can be productively explored by looking at the main points of conflict between cyber-libertarians and critical political economists. Those Internet commentators who in some way adhere to neo-liberal free market philosophy see privatization as the best means towards optimizing democratic participation.[65] These commentators believe that a privatized, de-regulated, and commercial Internet will be more democratic than the one that was state owned and controlled. First, it is held that, the privatization of the Net and deregulation of related industries will foster competition between private network operators (suppliers and developers) which will bring down prices of Internet equipment and services, enabling more people to get online. Second, this competition will also enable the Internet to develop efficiently and democratically. The type of network that develops will be dictated by consumer demand rather than by state authority which is seen as an obstruction to innovation and democratic choice. Finally, in contrast to the paternalism associated with the history of state interventionism in mass media programming, a commercial online world offers individuals the power to demand the content they want. Cyberspace provides a space where a multiplicity of buyers and sellers can come together and through near instantaneous information flows achieve near optimal individual choice.

This argument, that a privatized and consumer-oriented Internet will facilitate democracy and the public sphere, is strongly contested by critical political economists.[66] These critics argue that discourse is controlled by market mechanisms when communications media are

[65] See for instance, Barlow (1996), Dyson et al. (1994), Gilder (1992), Gingrich (1995), Gates (1995, 1999), and Kelly (1998). Liberal commentators less idealistic about the market still tend to see no essential contradiction between commercial imperatives and democracy, given that various checks to monopoly control are in place. See for instance, Gore (1994), Grossman (1995), Kapor and Weitzner (1993), Negroponte (1995), and Toffler and Toffler (1994).

[66] I introduced the general critical political economy approach briefly in Chapter Four. Recent critical political economy analysis of the Internet and democracy includes Golding (1998), McChesney (1999), McChesney et al. (1998), D. Schiller (1999), H. Schiller (1995b), and Stallabrass (1995).

privatized and deregulated. Following this line of argument, critical political economists show how each of the three above claims about the democratic promises of a market driven Internet can be negated. First, far from providing greater access, the privatization of the network will simply contribute to the exclusivity of the online world. Second, the de-regulation of industries does not lead to greater competition but rather to the convergence of communications industries and the concentration of capital.[67] This puts control ever more in the hands of an elite group of industrialists with corporate profits as their sole goal. The online world is developed with a view to making profits, rather than the aim of enabling cooperative interaction. Finally, the choices that liberal individualists talk of in reference to an online market represent those of a private consumer model of democracy, not to a democracy of public deliberation. As commercialization proceeds, the spaces of non-commercial, two-way communicative interaction are sidelined. Taken together, these three criticisms lead to Schiller's (1995b) conclusion that expression in cyberspace is being taken over and controlled by (American) corporate interests.

The three points of contention outlined above provide the scaffolding around which I will investigate the impact upon online communications of increasing corporate control and commercialization. I will examine in turn the privatization, or commodification, of Internet technologies, the corporate control of online discourse, and the commercialization of online spaces. The exploration of these three issues will bring to the fore two of the seven requirements of public sphere conception. First, the requirement of inclusion is highlighted as I consider the impact of Internet privatization upon access. Second, the autonomy of online discourse from economic interests will be the central concern as I consider the degree of corporate control of online discourse and the extent of the commercialization of cyberspace. My analysis will be partial towards (though not completely adherent to) the critical political economy position because it offers a superior explanatory model and is more in tune with the normative commitments of deliberative democracy.[68]

[67] The United Nations Development Program (1999) reported that huge telecommunications corporations are controlling ever-growing shares of the global market. By 1998 10 telecommunications corporations held 8 6 percent of the market. There is a similar story in the media sector. 'By the time Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly* was published in 1983, he estimated that around fifty media conglomerates dominated the overwhelming majority of US media. By the fifth edition, in 1997, Bagdikian argued that due to mergers and acquisitions this total was down to around ten firms, with another dozen or so assuming secondary positions' (McChesney, 1998:7).

[68] The strength of the critical economy position comes to light during my evaluation.

5.5.1 Cyberspace as Commodity

Many cyber-enthusiasts claim the Internet is essentially democratic because it offers everyone the ability to take part in communication with whomever they wish. Cairncross (1997:95), for instance, argues that '[a]nybody can send a message across it [the Internet] or create a "site".' However, access restrictions to cyberspace negate such expansive claims. The majority of the world's population do not even have access to the telephone let alone e-mail. Cyber-libertarians often reply to such criticisms by arguing that the privatization of the Internet is *leading towards* universal access. The early Internet was restricted to a very select, officially approved group of well-educated, largely male Americans housed within a narrow range of institutions. With privatization, restrictions to access are (in most countries) less formal. A person needs only to pay the associated financial costs, to have the necessary networking skills, and have sufficient spare time.

Cyber-demographics seem to support the argument that privatization will make the Internet more open than a regime of state control. Quantitative measures of online use show that the Internet has become *less* exclusive since its commercialization. Cut-throat competition between ISPs has continued to lower access costs and thus to enable greater numbers of people to go online.[69] As a result, the online population is increasingly representative of the offline population. The ratio of women to men online has been steadily rising (closing in on 50 percent in many Western nations), and the average income levels of online users are moving down towards mainstream levels (Kling, 1999). Pew Center (1999) research shows that '[i]ncreasingly people without college training, those with modest incomes, and women are joining the ranks of Internet users, who not long ago were largely well-educated, affluent men.'

Certainly for the middle-class Western consumer the Internet has become a cheap means of communication, especially in comparison to international telephone charges.[70] However, the pre-privatized Internet was free and there is no evidence to suggest that a public service model would not have allowed for an even faster growth rate than that which has occurred since privatization. Furthermore, the social costs of networking, notably money, education, and time are not insignificant, and along with the need for technical and community support

[69] The rate of Internet growth continues to be extremely high. Findings from Angus Reid Group's *Face of the Web* (2000) worldwide Internet study – based on a sample of 28,374 Internet users in 34 countries – 'estimates that more than 150 million people will use the Internet for the first time this year [2000], joining well over 300 million current on-line users worldwide.'

[70] Packet switching (as with the Internet) is a much cheaper way to transmit data than circuit switching (as with the telephone network). On packet switching technology, see Section 5.3.

for users, still prevent many from participating online.[71] Despite the rapid growth of the Internet population, Pew Center (1999) research shows '[t]he 74 million Americans who go online remain substantially younger, better-educated and more affluent than the US population at large. Fully 39% of Internet users are college graduates, for example, compared to just 22% of all Americans. Similarly, 80% of Internet users are under age 50, compared to 63% of all Americans.' Research released by Jupiter Communications in June 2000 confirms a pronounced gap in US Internet usage based upon age and income, and also points to disparities in Internet usage between ethnic groups, with 60% more white households online than African-Amercian households. The disparities in Europe are even greater. While ten million Britons now have Internet access, another fifteen 15 million do not believe they will ever go online because they see the medium as irrelevant to their needs and too expensive.[72] Pro Active's (2000) recent survey research shows that 'almost half of Europeans in the highest income categories had been online in the fortnight before they were polled . . . [but] only 10 percent of those in the lowest income groups had been online in the 14 days before the survey.' Men were also more likely to have used the Internet recently, with 36 percent of all European Internet users estimated to be women.[73]

Restrictions to participation in cyberspace are even greater in the 'third world.' As well as greater poverty and lower levels of networking skills, inadequate media, telecommunications

[71] A lack of both technical support and social connection with other online users have been found to be serious impediments to people using computer networks (Agre, 1997).

[72] From Which?Online's survey http://www.which.net/whatsnew/pr/jul00/genereal/survey.html (last accessed 1/8/00).

[73] Internet participation in terms of gender is rapidly levelling out, but men still spend more time online than women, as Nielsen NetRatings' (reporting on Feb 2000 data) research shows: 'Men comprised 54 percent of those who logged on at work in the United States in February and surfed for an average of 22 hours during that month in comparison with an average of 18 hours for women online at work. Although half of all home Internet users are now women, they still spend less time online than men do. Women were only online at home for an average of 8 hours while men spent 10 hours surfing' (http://www.nua.ie/surveys/?f=VS&art_id=905355677&rel=true). However, this gender discrepancy is not likely to last for long in most 'developed' nations going by Angus Reid Group's (2000) recent survey of worldwide Internet use that shows that while 'about 59% of current Internet users are male and 41% female', the number 'of people who intend to go online this year, an estimated 54% will be female and 46% male . . . [and] in the "leading edge" countries of the U.S., Canada, Australia, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands and Switzerland, the percentage of women intending to log on this year jumps to 60%.' In fact, Nielsen NetRatings' research showed that participation (time spent online) in the United States during March 2000 was evenly split between males and females. Other countries continued to show a slightly higher percentage of males to females online, with males accounting for 60 percent of users in Singapore, 61 percent of users in the United Kingdom, and 55 percent of users in New Zealand (http://63.140.238.20/press_releases/pr_000504.htm). All sites accessed 27/7/00.

and computing infrastructures impede networking in many nations.[74] Participation is further restricted if a person does not have working knowledge of English or one of the other languages dominant online. These restrictions reinforce the extreme inequalities in the distribution of information and communications resources that in turn intensify the structural inequalities of global capitalism. A *United Nations Development Program Human Development Report* (1999) confirms that Internet access is widening the gap between the traditionally powerful and those who need empowerment the most: between men and women, rich and poor, north and south, educated and illiterate, urban and rural. The report found that,

> the typical Internet user worldwide is male, under 35 years old, with a university education, urban-based and English speaking – a member of a very elite minority. . . . English is used in almost 80 percent of Web sites, yet fewer than one in 10 people worldwide speaks the language. The literally well-connected have an overpowering advantage over the unconnected poor, whose voices and concerns are being left out of the global conversation.

According due consideration to these growing cyber-stratifications is now commonplace in electronic democracy writings. Free-marketeers argue that technological innovation and market competition will continue to force prices down, proliferate points of access and expand opportunities to develop Internet skills (see, for instance, Ness, 1997). Even these commentators, however, tend to be pessimistic about *universal* access through the market, at least in the short term. This lack of faith in the freemarket, combined with the general acceptance of the desirability of achieving 'the information society', has lead to growing calls for some form of universal public provision of Internet access and computer literacy training. Many government authorities are taking this seriously. Singapore is attempting to link every household to the Internet (Rodan, 1998). The United States has made online access an explicit part of its NII plans. British, Japanese, Australian, New Zealand, and most European governments, claim to hold universal access to information networks as an important priority.[75] At the local level, many cities around the world have provided public

[74] Bulgaria, which itself lags behind most other Western nations in Internet connections, has more Internet hosts than the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, excluding South Africa (United Nations Development Program, 1999). See Holderness (1998) for further discussion of Internet access and developments in the third world. See Golding (1998) for general insights into the inequalities in communications between first and third world nations.

[75] On various government initiatives regarding the expansion of national information infrastructures, see Kahin and Wilson (1997). Some of these governments also claim to hold global Internet access as a priority. Such claims can be seen in the US Government's National Information Infrastructure (NII)

Internet access ports, placing them in schools, hospitals, shopping malls, and libraries.[76] On the International stage, high-level government and corporate bodies have made significant noises about the need to achieve truly universal Internet access. At its annual meeting in 2000 at Davos, Switzerland, The World Economic Forum launched its Global Digital Divide Initiative to address 'the challenge of bridging the global digital divide.'[77] Similarly, at its July 2000 summit at Okinawa, Japan, the G8 promised to set up a task force to explore ways in which 'to bridge the international information and knowledge divide.'[78]

Unfortunately, universal access in many nations will probably never be realized. Many developing nations struggle to provide food and shelter for their populations, let alone Internet access. Of course, the exclusion of the poverty-stricken from cyberspace is not a significant problem for the corporates who own the Internet and dominate cyberspace. In the wealthier Western democracies, where citizens generally can afford to go online and have the skills to participate, a high rate of Internet access has already been achieved.[79] However, universal access does not guarantee a democratic cyberspace. Although it may remove certain barriers to access, it does not determine what finally goes on in cyberspace. Universal access does not of itself determine what information will be provided, what will be said, and how it will be said. It does not guarantee that reflexive, respectful, and reciprocal deliberations autonomous from state and corporate interests take place. It does not even guarantee the inclusion and equality of participation in cyber-deliberations. These aspects of the public sphere conception are determined by multiple factors at both system and lifeworld levels. In Chapter Six and Seven I will investigate determinations at the level of the lifeworld via an analysis of cyber-culture. Here, I need to consider further the impact of the privatization and commercialization of the Internet upon the autonomy of online deliberations.

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rhetoric. More recently, in preparation for hosting the 2000 G8 summit in Okinawa, the Japanese Government put forward a 'comprehensive co-operation package' in order to 'address the International Digital Divide.' See http://www.g8kyushu-okinawa.go.jp/e/theme/it.html (last accessed 1/8/00).

[76] See Tsagarousianou et al. (1998).

[77] Refer to the archive Home+-+Centres+-+Global+Digital+Divide+Initiative at http://www.weforum.org/centres.nsf/Documents/(last accessed 1/8/00).

[78] See http://www.g8kyushu-okinawa.go.jp/e/documents/commu.html (last accessed 1/8/00).

[79] Nielson Netratings (http://www.netratings.com/) estimated that by July 2000 over 130 million Americans had Internet access.

5.5.2 Corporate Control of Online Discourse

Corporates have gained increasing ownership and control of the Internet since its privatization. *The U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996* has recently reinforced this trend. By removing regulatory controls over Internet-related industries, the Act also shifts 'much of the control formerly held by the US Government into the hands of the industry itself' (Martin, 1996:10-11). This means that the course of the Internet will now be largely determined by the market and not public policy (McChesney, 1996:104). We have already seen the mixed results of this privatization for Internet access. Here I want to look at how corporate Internet ownership impacts upon online discourse, both directly through the control of what gets online, and indirectly, through 'writing' the Internet's form.

The most obvious place where corporates can control online discourse is at the point of entry to cyberspace. As well as through access charges, commercial Internet Service Providers (ISPs) can control online discourse by direct censorship of incoming messages. Apart from complying with government regulation (see Section 5.4.1), the main reason commercial ISPs would censor online discourse is to keep content 'clean' in order to gain the loyal support of certain sectors of the population. Take for instance the case of Prodigy, a computer network company providing a number of services, including access to the Internet. Prodigy has been extensively criticized for censoring out 'offensive content' from its system (including discussion about Prodigy's own policies and any discussion about gay issues) and for dismissing dissenting members from the service (Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996:12; Rheingold, 1993:278; Shapiro, 1995:11). America Online and Compuserve (now owned by the former), two other computer network services, have also been involved in legal disputes regarding freedom of expression in public forums (see Fernback, 1997:48).

Such censorship, though possible, is rare and often ineffective. Not only does the risk of losing customers limit commercial ventures from undertaking censorship, but the overall control of online interchange is virtually impossible due to the multiple ways of gaining access and the literally millions of content producers. In this regard the Internet could be seen as operating more like the telephone system than the mass media, as an (unofficial) common carrier that does not discriminate over content. Even groups opposed to the corporate owners of the Internet can utilize the medium to organize their opposition. As such, open content and dialogue seems assured. Some critical political economists, however, argue that the threat of a corporate takeover of cyber-discourse flows less from overt censorship than from the developing horizontal and vertical integration of Internet companies.

With digitization, the distinctions between the transmission of voice, image, and data, break down. A single media-technology system involving all the presently disparate information and communications media seems imminent. This promise of technical convergence is used by neo-liberal corporate and political leaders to argue for telecommunications liberalization policies. Full de-regulation of the media sector is necessary in order to allow companies to operate across the areas of computing, telecommunications, and broadcasting (UNCTAD, 1995; European Commission, 1997).

Within Western democracies this neo-liberal (and typically techno-determinist) argument for media liberalization has had considerable influence over the last two decades. In Britain, restrictions on mutual ownership of cable and telecommunications companies were removed in the late 1980s. The European Union has followed suit, particularly pushing forward the liberalization of the network infrastructure throughout Europe since 1998 (Hills, 1998:111). In the South Pacific, New Zealand has developed one of the most de-regulated telecommunications and media markets in the world (Hope, 1996b; Johnstone, 1995; Ministry of Commerce, 1997). In the United States, the 1996 *Telecommunications Act* may be the most important single piece of legislation yet in terms of corporate convergence in the media industries. As the FCC explains, '[t]he aim of this act is to let anyone enter any communications business – to let any communications business compete in any market against any other.'[80]

Given this ongoing de-regulation, companies dealing with telecommunications, cable television, computer software and hardware, information transmission and anything remotely related to computer networking, are positioning themselves for control of the developing Internet. It is, as Bill Gates (1995:227) predicted, a 'race for the gold.' Increased competition, however, may actually lead to smaller companies being squeezed out or engulfed by giant media and telecommunications conglomerates. This prediction of capital concentration is supported by past trends. In Britain, the liberalization of telecommunications and cable industries aimed to increase competition (especially with British Telecom), but after an initial flurry of new ventures, capital concentration has taken place, with the number of cable companies dropping from thirty-six to twelve in ten years (Hills, 1998:110-111). In New Zealand, de-regulation has allowed increased competition, but one company still holds a monopoly on telecommunications and media services (Hope, 1996b; Johnstone, 1995). On a global scale, mergers and alliances have continued at pace

[80] See http://www.fcc.gov/telecom.html (last accessed 1/8/00).

throughout the 1990s (Hills, 1998; Schiller, 1999). The rate and scale of new media merger announcements seem to be escalating as we enter the new Millenium. Some of the more significant mergers have included the $US36 billion Viacom-CBS merger in 1999, the $US44 billion merger of AT&T and MediaOne Group in June 2000, the massive $US151.8 billion merger in early 2000 of America Online and Time-Warner, and the colossal $US198.9 billion Vodafone Airtouch takeover of Mannesmann AG of Germany in early 2000. The last is the largest commercial takeover in history; the express aim of Vodafone is to become the dominate global wireless Internet service provider.

The vertical integration of Internet conduit and content companies is particularly significant for online democracy. Given that huge sums are likely to be made from content supply on the future multimedia networks, big conduit suppliers are attempting to merge with large commercial content suppliers to maximize revenues. As Gates (1995:241-242) indicates,

> The ambitions of cable and phone companies go well beyond simply providing a pipe for bits. . . . Many see the highway as a sort of economic food chain, with the delivery and distribution of bits at the bottom, and various types of applications, services, and content layered on top. Companies in the bit-distribution business are attracted to the idea of moving themselves up the food chain – profiting from owning the bits rather than from just delivering them. This is why cable companies, regional telephone companies, and consumer-electronics manufacturers are rushing to work with Hollywood studios, television and cable broadcasters, and other content businesses.

Gates believes the future strategy of large corporates, including his own Microsoft Corporation, is to supply a package of content, equipment, lines and service.[81] This prediction is increasingly becoming a reality, as is clearly signalled by the aforementioned mergers: Viacom-CBS, AT&T-MediaOne, GroupAmerica Online-Time-Warner all encompass content and conduit suppliers while the Vodafone-Mannesmann conglomerate plans to join (or take-over) content suppliers such as France's Vivendi. These large corporates, unlike smaller players, will be able to survive the cut-throat competition that is already taking place. In the end we could be left with just a few trans-national Internet service and content providers who can control much of what goes online.

[81] Gates' own *Microsoft Network* operates both as an ISP and the provider of a package of services at its MSNBC site (www.msnbc.com). In the latter case, both traditional online interactivity and Webcast programmes are offered, supported by Microsoft's (newly acquired) cable television and news networks.

Cyber-libertarians, and liberal optimists like Shapiro (1999), argue that the technological qualities of the Internet (particularly its decentralization) will resist such a concentration of capital. Following the information society thesis, cyber-libertarians even see a post-monopoly capitalism developing through the Internet. New information and communications technology, Gilder (1992) enthuses, is

> hostile to hierarchies, monopolies, industrial bureaucracies, and other top-down systems of all kinds. Just as intelligence and control are moving from gigantic mainframes to personal computers, from centralized databases to desktop libraries, from the central Bell pyramid to a new array of communications tools, and from a few national broadcast networks to millions of programmers around the globe, so is economic power shifting from mass institutions to individuals.

Against this technologically determinist rhetoric, critical political economists point to the *actual* concentration of capital taking place.[82] As shown, horizontal and vertical integration are both rapidly intensifying. A couple of dozen large corporates are dominating the field. These Corporates have at their own disposal telecommunications conduits, conventional media to promote their Internet online sites, and advertisers to whom they can sell cyber-audiences (McChesney, 1999; Schiller, 1999). Given the threat this concentration poses to the diversity of Internet communications, critical political economists suggest various measures to ensure it does not eventuate. Moore (1999) argues that since the 'worst aspects of commercialized cyberspace . . . arise from monopoly concentration' then the 'indicated policy strategy would be to focus on preventing monopolization – both the horizontal and vertical variety.' As an alternative to regulation to prevent horizontal integration, he suggests *officially* according the Internet common carrier status.[83] To restrict vertical monopoly, he advocates strict separation of content owners from carriers. Miller (1996) similarly suggests the separation of suppliers of information content and services (such as

[82] Against the cyber-libertarian rhetoric, the late-capitalist theorists (outlined in Section 5.2.1) provide much evidence that the decentralized nature of new information technologies are in fact quite useful for *building* empires and hierarchies, for concentrating capital through dispersal. See Dawson and Foster (1998) for further critique of cyber-libertarian claims about virtual capitalism.

[83] Common carrier regulation normally requires the provision of non-discriminatory access for all. It is usually imposed in a monopoly situation when a single monopolistic network occurs which could discriminate between messages and deny some people the means of communication (Pool, 1983:106). This monopoly situation is not the case with the present Internet. The Internet provides for what Pool (1983:106) describes as the traditional law of the free press, where the paper, ink, and presses are in sufficient abundance such that no regulation is needed to allow people to express themselves freely. However, this may not be the case if horizontal integration occurs and a monopoly situation develops in which the carrier has the power to discriminate between content.

electronic mail, home shopping, and video conferencing) and communications carriers. '[W]e've got to enact policies that impose an impenetrable wall between the business of providing access and that of providing the information that is being distributed. Control over content must be meaningful separated from control over conduit' (Miller, 1996:247). Without common carrier status and restrictions on vertical integration, the Internet may end up as a centrally-operated broadcast medium, like radio. McChesney (1999) agrees, but argues that vertical and horizontal integration have already gone too far. Those interested in democratizing the media must now take more affirmative action and push for breaking up the big media and Internet companies that have developed. Aggressive subsidies are also needed to extend non-commercial media and Internet projects.

McChesney's call for subsidizing public Internet initiatives is important because corporate domination of online discourse may eventuate even if corporate convergence is halted or common carrier status granted. The free-market environment in which the Internet is being developed favours commercial online practices over democratic discourse: the Internet becomes 'written' in line with capitalist interests. Software and hardware developments are dominated by the demands of business clients (securing transactions and copyrights) and by online commerce (shopping and entertainment). As a result, the technology and its possible uses become inscribed with commercial rather than democratic goals.[84] This is not to deny the ability of the user to re-appropriate the technology for alternative uses, as was the case with the early Internet. As Thompson (1995) emphasizes, the resourcefulness of actors in appropriating media technologies for their own everyday purposes must not be underestimated. However, the Internet continues to be structured with commercially-driven 'preferred readings' in mind.

Such commercially-driven structuring can be illustrated by moves towards a broadcast Internet. Webradio and WebTV are already available.[85] Rather than the viewer having to 'pull' information from the Web, Webcasting 'streams' video and audio to the viewer. Webcasters often combine asynchronous modes (programmes that can be downloaded at anytime) with broadcast-type, synchronous modes (scheduled programming – daily, weekly, and specially advertised programmes). Often the programming broadcast over the Web are

[84] The power of commercial interests over technology is seen in the fact that certain technologies are not commercially released, even if already developed, until they can be assured to bring in a profit. For more examples of the free market impeding the development of technology (including radio, television, and fax) as a public good, see Drew (1995:71-72).

[85] See for instance http://www.onlinetv.com/ (last accessed 1/8/00).

just reproductions of commercial mass media broadcasts – media companies simply dump their existing content online. As such, the shift towards a broadcast model is important for the big Hollywood producers. As Cunningham (1998) notes:

> Overall, the Hollywood majors regard the brightest future for their kinds of services as based on the need to 'de-computerise' the environment and move the interface to the television set and the family rooms of the house.

What is the likelihood of this? Will the interactive Internet be marginalized broadcast TV? According to Cunningham (ibid),

> They [Hollywood majors] are encouraged in this strategy by current statistics which indicate that 65 per cent of WebTV users log on every day, while only 11 per cent of traditional computer services users log on every day. A further encouragement is the expectation that digital television – a standard for television hardware mandated for introduction by the early 21st century throughout most developed countries – will push entertainment services definitively from a personal computer platform to a television-like platform.

The development of the Internet's form towards broadcasting shows that corporate control inevitably leads to the demands of those with the most money being met. Of course, the uses of the Internet are not completely fixed by design, which continues to offer a certain degree of interpretative flexibility. As well as a means by which commercial values can penetrate further into the lifeworld, online broadcasting could offer a means of bringing the public together to deliberate on common issues. Furthermore, whether finally developing through the Internet or some other broadcast-capable technology (smart TVs, dumb computers, set-top boxes, and so on), a multi-media broadcast system is unlikely to completely displace two-way online discourse given the popularity of e-mail, online conferencing, and chat systems.[86] However, even if corporates do not come to control all cyber-discourse in the various ways described above, the expansion of commercial activity online is likely to

[86] The broadcasting model at present has a number of technical hitches. Cunningham (1998) argues that there are many technical problems (for example, slow frame rates and jerky visuals) that mean good quality, one-to-many broadcasts over the Internet will not be commercially viable for a long time to come. Other commentators argue that the only technical problem is limited bandwidth and this is constantly increasing (with technical advances in fibre optic and wireless technology). The big challenge now is providing enough bandwidth to stream video. This limitation can be overcome in the meantime by multicasting, putting a copy of the video to be screened on multiple servers so that it is able to be broadcast by using multiple transmission lines.

sideline spaces of communicative interaction. I will investigate this threat to online public discourse in the following section.

5.5.3 Online Commerce

The Internet is an important part of what is being called the 'new economy.'[87] In particular, it is becoming central to the expansion of consumer capitalism. The Internet offers more than a billboard for advertising. It provides a very cost-effective form of targeted marketing and sales. As Gates (1995:171) argues, the Internet enables businesses to 'sort consumers' individually, delivering each a 'different stream of advertising.' As well as marketing, businesses and customers can use the Internet's interactivity to achieve cost-effective transactions, proliferating the direct points of sale (Dawson and Foster, 1998:61-62). As consultant Kent Duston (1996) enthuses, '[t]he Internet is undeniably the most cost-effective way of interacting with your customer in the world today.' This is not just good for the seller but for the consumer too, who can 'place orders, inquire about prices, check stock levels, make a payment to their account, [and] request credit.' All this takes place at low cost and with little regard for time and space. As such, the Internet, proclaims Gates (1995:157-158), promises to realize Adam Smith's perfect market, where information is instantaneously available. The Internet will 'carry us into a new world of low-friction, low-overhead capitalism, in which market information will be plentiful and transaction costs low. It will be a shopper's heaven.'

Cyber-libertarians like Gates argue that this online free market will not only realize a 'shopper's heaven' but will enhance and spread democracy. Support for this contention can already be found in moves by authoritarian regimes to allow greater freedom of expression through the Internet in the hope of the economic benefits that are promised by information society rhetoric.[88] However, the expansion of consumerism will not lead to greater democratic activity. Increased commercial activity through the Internet will not facilitate the public sphere. At best, commercialism advances strategic action. At worst, it sidelines or completely displaces communicative rationality. To what extent this is this actually taking place? Is commercial activity displacing communicative action from cyberspace? My concern here is not so much with the business-to-business use of the Internet but rather with the use of the Internet by individual citizens. What is at stake are the citizen-to-citizen

[87] See for instance the US Department of Commerce's *Digital Economy 2000* report at http://www.esa.doc.gov/de2000.pdf (last accessed 1/2/00).

[88] For example, 'Singapore recently passed e-commerce laws that relieve ISPs of liability for content carried over their equipment' (Erickson, 1998:49).

spaces of communicative action that hold possibilities for enhancing the deliberative public sphere but have come under increasing threat from ever-expanding online commerce.

Commercial activity online has proliferated since it began to invade the Internet in the early 1990s. The Internet now hosts hundreds of thousands of 'points-of-sale' and is dense with advertising, ranging from advertising banners on Websites to junk e-mail 'spammed' to tens of thousands of users. As well as hard commodities, 'soft' (digital) commodities are being marketed online. These dematerialized commodities include art, videos, magazines, and music, which can be bought as a one-off download or as a rental access package (for example, a monthly rental for Webcasting).[89] These soft goods are able to be stored, replicated, circulated, and destroyed as demand dictates at little or no (material) cost (Stallabrass, 1995:20).[90] Although sales and profits from online commerce have not yet matched the hype, revenues are starting to take off.[91] Richard Ram (1999:102) notes some of the American Internet commerce success stories for 1998:

> There's been a lot of talking and not much action during the past few years, but 1998 finally saw some serious business starting to take place online. . . . Cisco Connection Online (www.cisco.com), a business-to-business site, is now selling US$11 million in networking equipment a day, some 45% of Cisco Systems' total revenue. Dell computers (www.dell.com/ap/) is selling US$5 million per day online, an annual turnover of $1.8billion. Microsoft's Expedia travel service (www.expedia.com) sells US$4 million per week, or more than $200 million a year, in airline tickets from its site. Ticketmaster (www.ticketmaster.com) sold US$70 million in tickets on its

[89] Audio transmission through the Internet advanced towards the end of the Millenium with a move from Progressive Networks Real-Audio with its 'squarky' sounds to MP3, a proprietary standard with near real digital quality sound which can be downloaded onto CDs. See www.mp3.com where a vast range of sounds can be found. For a search of MP3 recordings, see mp3.lycos.com (both sites last accessed 3/4/00).

[90] The purchase and storage of intellectual property is being undertaken for future demand. 'Large companies are active buying the digital rights to all kinds of data, from financial records to pop records; they are not doing this to distribute them free of charge' (Stallabrass, 1995:4,11). For instance, Microsoft's Bill Gates (1995:224-225) has started a company, Corbis, which is buying up the digital rights to visual imagery, which ranges from 'history, science and technology to natural history, world cultures, and fine arts', and selling them through the 'virtual marketplace.'

[91] In late 1998, President Clinton postulated that in four years US$1.5 trillion worth of e-commerce will be conducted annually, ushering the greatest prosperity the United States, indeed the world, has ever known (Horrocks, 1999:112). This claim is supported by IDC Internet research conducted in early 2000, which estimates that by 2003 worldwide Internet commerce will grow to US$1.6 trillion and that 38% of those who go online will purchase a good, rising from 28% in 2000. See http://www.idc.com/Internet/press /PR/NET0060500PR.stm (last accessed 1/8/00).

> Web site in 1997, roughly 3% of its total ticket sales; for 1998, it expects to have sold about US$140 million in tickets from its site.

Online sales (although not necessarily profits) should continue to grow as users gain confidence with the online market, and privacy and credit card transactions become increasingly secure. Pew Centre (1999) research supports this prediction: 'the rate of consumer purchasing on the Internet is skyrocketing. . . . 32% of Internet users had bought something online, a leap from just 8% in 1995. If consumers grow more confident about the security of online commerce, this number may climb higher: 61% of Internet users who have not yet made an online purchase cite credit card security as a reason.'

Thousands of commercial sites now compete in cyberspace with each other and with non-commercial sites for the online audience. Large offline corporations have the advantage of well established branding and customer loyalty. They can also draw upon their extensive product lines to offer enticing packages.[92] Disney's online operation is a good example of this. According to Jake Winebaum, president of Disney Online, Disney is attempting to 'create a product that could become part of someone's everyday life' (cited in Maloney, 1998:12). Disney offers a number of different packages aimed at different consumer groups.

> *Disney.com* . . . dishes up news about movies, TV shows, videos and software. . . . It is attracting some 550,000 different visitors a day and is hailed as the No.1 kid's site on the Internet. *Family.com* owns the top spot for parents in search of guidance on the care and feeding of their little ones. *Blast.com*, a US$5.95-a-month online service for kids, ranks No.2, following only the *Wall Street Journal* in revenue from paying subscribers. Disney hit the sweet spot with *Blast*, according to Jupiter Communications. The market-research firm found that "53% of parents with on-line-savvy kids would be open to paying for subscription services that monitor content and chat for kids."
>
> As for electronic commerce . . . Disney's *shop.com* site, which carries some 2,000 products, [is] one of the few profitable Socio-s. . . . ESPN's Sportszone [Disney-owned], which has close to a million individual visits a day, is the No.1 online sports site. (Maloney, 1998:12-13)

[92] Having a trusted brand name is very important for successful cyber-commerce, given that customers are not physically co-present with the seller with whom they have to put their trust. For this reason, it is much easier for a company to have success online if it already has a good reputation offline.

Disney also owns ABC, which runs ABC.com, ABCnews.com, and a range of other sites. The central idea (also banked on by Microsoft, Yahoo, and others) is to capture the consumer through a one-stop shop, a customized digital mall, where a customer can do everything at a place they 'trust' without the hassle and time wastage of Net surfing. In many cases users are able to sit back and allow sites to push pre-selected and personalized information to their screens. This may involve suggestions of purchases of hard commodities that fit the consumer's pre-selected needs, or it could involve the Webcasting of audio and video 'streams' to customers. While hard commodity business gain revenues based on commodity sales alone, commercial Webcasters, like broadcasting, gain revenues from selling programming to audiences as well as selling the audience to advertisers. In all cases, the aim is to secure and increase one's audience. Big commercial media outfits are very experienced and successful in the marketing business and have every chance of dominating the online world. As Disney's Winebaum proclaims, '[w]e know how to get a consumer online to make purchases' (cited in Maloney, 1998:14).

To help find audiences, commercial Internet ventures can utilize the same surveillance techniques discussed above with regards to administrative power. Pressure to develop niche marketing encourages the construction of data profiles on individuals' addresses, interests, incomes, health, occupations, lifestyle, and so on. If customers do not voluntarily provide information, data profiles can simply be developed through digital surveillance. This is done very easily on the Internet, as Lyon (1997:12) explains:

> Websites frequently send automatic messages back to their owners, providing data about users' needs, habits, and purchases, based on their visits to the site in question. Some transactional information is passively recorded, such that the webmaster can determine what files, pictures, or images are of interest to the user, how long was spent with each, and where the user was before and after visiting that site. Internet Profiles, known better as I/PRO, indicate just how well and by whom a site is used.

Information agents known as 'cookies' offer extensive tracking capabilities for these purposes. Cookies are pieces of data containing information about a user that attach themselves to a user's hard drive. This enables a user to revisit a site without having to re-register, given that the site already 'knows the user' from the details stored on the cookie. Cookies are also used in online shopping, to keep track of any items a customer places in

their electronic 'shopping cart', before going through the electronic checkout.[93] The information collected by cookies (name, e-mail address, shopping preferences, interests, and so on) can also be used to develop profiles of users for marketing purposes. Detailed consumer profiles can be developed and sold to interested companies, notably to direct marketers seeking to identify potential customers.[94] This sort of surveillance, which is being continually refined as the Internet is 'written' for commerce, may be more of a threat to freedom online than state surveillance. As Anne Branscomb (1997:453) notes,

> indeed, one of the major threats of the Internet is that everything you purchase, every trip you make, everything you say, everything you may do, may end up in an amazingly accurate dossier about you: your personal preferences, your life-style, and your political preferences. It is not so much "Big Brother, the Government" that is the threat today, so much as "Big Brother, Big Business."

As people become more aware of this commercial surveillance they are likely to take measures to protect their private interests. Cyber-libertarians in particular demand protection of online communications. At the same time as seeking out customers, most online commercial enterprises also want to make cyberspace 'safe' for their consumers and business clients. Data protection mechanisms and ways to enforce information property rights (copyright laws and means of securing royalty payments) have become substantial areas of research and popular discussion.[95] However, the focus here is upon consumer privacy and thus, along with surveillance and e-commerce in general, tends to constitute online participation as a privatized and individualized affair.

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[93] Most Web browsers at present allow users to monitor, delete, and block incoming cookies. Yet most users do not know how to do this.

[94] Firms like Cyveillance are available for those who want to carry out professional private surveillance of many types of online activities, and are prepared to pay the necessary costs. See http://www.cyveillance.com (last accessed 20/5/00).

[95] Data protection mechanisms include firewalls, encryption, secure credit card transactions, and privacy of information guarantees. The issue of encryption highlights the tension between the needs of electronic commerce and electronic surveillance. The US Government (amongst others) argues that to protect the population from terrorists, criminals and other enemies of the state, unbreakable encryption must be outlawed. At the same time it (along with other governments) is aware that to encourage cyber-commerce, commercial encryption is important. The US Government is thus proposing a system of encryption strong enough to encourage Internet commerce but weak enough to enable interception by government intelligence services. For further discussion of the various methods of cryptography and debates about its use in cyberspace, including the plans of the US Government, see Denning (1997).

The above discussion has highlighted the spread of commercial values within all areas of cyberspace. Online marketing and surveillance are becoming more and more difficult to avoid, even within spaces dedicated to non-commercial interactions. There is a real threat that online public deliberations will be incorporated or marginalized by this penetration of instrumental reason. Spaces where commercial values take hold lose their ability to build rational public opinion. Participants are constituted as consumers who pursue their individual interests rather than as reflexive citizens. However, there are still a vast number of communicative spaces on tens of thousands of non-commercial e-mail lists, chat lines, and Websites. These sites are no more than semi-autonomous from instrumental rationality because they cannot be separated from the context of corporate control of the Internet and the larger capitalist system. Furthermore, they are under threat of being marginalized by commercial cyberspace. Despite such important qualifications, there remains a thriving world of communicative action online. Cyberspace thus continues to provide a basis for argumentation and the expansion of the public sphere against the incursion of instrumental rationality.

5.6 Conclusion

The Internet provides a global medium for two-way asynchronous and synchronous communication between many millions of individuals. There are a myriad of online spaces constituted by communicative interaction. However, in this chapter I have shown that there is an increasing colonization of communicative interaction in cyberspace by the media of money and administrative power. This colonization limits both access to cyberspace and the autonomy of online interactions. While the Internet is in principle open to all, structurally imposed limits to access mean that a majority of the world's population cannot even get online. Furthermore, state and corporate incursions into cyberspace have encouraged privatized and individualized interactions. In particular, public online communications are increasingly organized by the common interest of the state and corporate power in capital accumulation, such that they are being incorporated into, or marginalized by, the ever more pervasive logic of the market.

Removing these impediments and establishing a fully autonomous, fully inclusive cyberspace would require major socio-structural change. However, administrative and corporate power are not total. While Internet development and online interaction are dominated by instrumental-strategic rationality, there are still many spaces of public communication online. In addition, Internet access is increasing. Internet connections are

rapidly expanding, although mostly in the 'first world', and public authorities are taking seriously the need for public access points. Moreover, *full* inclusion and autonomy are not required before the online discourse that currently exists in restricted form can contribute to the development of the public sphere. Consistent with the critical character of the public sphere conception, existing deliberative practices offer the basis from which to launch the drive towards full autonomy and inclusion and contribute to the enhancement of the public sphere at large.

While pointing to the possibilities contained within present online discourse, I do not want to underestimate the threat posed by administrative power and money. Moreover, it must be noted that this chapter has not established that online interaction in fact takes the form of communicative rationality required by the public sphere conception. It may be, for example, that online communication lacks the rational reflexivity of post-conventional discourse and relies heavily upon a realm of pre-discursive values. Can the elements of communicative rationality actually be identified within interactive cyberspace? To answer this question we need to move from the system analysis of the present chapter to an analysis of the lifeworld of (online) communicative practices. This will be the task of the next chapter. I will investigate the extent to which communicative rationality can be identified within the 'everyday' culture of cyberspace. This task will require a critical comparison of cyber-interactions with the public sphere conception.

Chapter 6 Online Culture and the Public Sphere

6.1 Introduction

Analysis at the system's level in the previous chapter revealed that although Internet access is presently limited, relatively autonomous communicative interaction can and does take place through cyberspace. The development of social integration, cultural reproduction, and socialization through this online communicative interaction has been extensively documented by observers of cyber-culture.[1] However, the advance of these aspects of the online lifeworld does not necessarily mean that communicative rationality, which is required for the formation of the public sphere, is also developing. Much online interaction, despite its semi-autonomy from state and corporate power, may be categorized as either strategic rationality or as conventional communicative action, forms of exchange that do not challenge participants' background convictions. Interaction often consists of private conversations, unreflexive bantering, the reinforcement of values in like-minded groups, entertainment, information seeking, and so on. Of course, as in the case of offline communication, we would not expect all (or even a large proportion) of online interaction to consist of argumentation. However, the public sphere will not be extended through cyberspace unless communicative rationality establishes a significant online presence. Determining whether this is the case requires a comparison of online debates – that is, those interactions most likely to contain communicative rationality – with the public sphere conception. This chapter undertakes that comparison. It does so by drawing upon a plethora of relevant cyber-culture research and my own participant observations, and by taking into account both technological and user determinations. This comparison will enable me to identify the aspects of communicative rationality that are being facilitated through the Internet, and to highlight those factors inhibiting its fuller realization. A more detailed exploration of these inhibiting factors will be undertaken in Chapter Seven, which investigates a number of cases of explicitly democratic Internet projects.

As argued in Chapter Two, the public sphere conception may be defined in terms of a set of seven interrelated requirements. The requirements for inclusion and autonomy are particularly prominent at the system's level analysed in the previous chapter, and will

[1] See, for example, Hafner (1997), Hauben and Hauben (1997), Rheingold (1993), Slevin (2000), Turkle (1995), and Watson (1997).

feature as important concluding themes in this thesis. In this chapter, however, it is the five other requirements of the public sphere conception that come more directly into play.

These requirements are:

i. Thematization and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims
ii. Reflexivity
iii. Ideal role taking
iv. Sincerity
v. Discursive equality

These five requirements provide an analytical template by which to identify those practices of online interaction that approximate communicative rationality and the public sphere. The first requirement will be used to determine the extent to which the basic structure of argumentation can be identified within cyber-interactions. The deliberative quality of any identified instances of argumentation will then be considered by way of the four remaining requirements. The requirement of discursive inclusion is not explicitly examined here, although it is effected by, and can impact upon, the quality of online argumentation. Discursive inclusion and discursive equality are particularly interconnected – the level of equality depending upon the level of inclusion and vice versa. I will therefore refer to discursive inclusion, where relevant, as I discuss each of the other five requirements in turn.

6.2 Cyber-Culture and the Public Sphere: A General Evaluation

6.2.1 Thematization and Critique of Criticizable Moral-Practical Validity Claims

The requirement of reciprocal critique sets the basic structure of argumentation. It demands the putting forward and subsequent critique of political claims that are criticizable, that is, that are backed with reasons rather than consisting of mere assertions. The 'rhythm' of computer-mediated communication (CMC), Kolb (1996:15-16) argues, encourages a pattern of discussion that clearly parallels this rational and dialogic form of conversation. With CMC,

> [t]opics get developed in several exchanges of shorter messages rather than in one exchange of long position statements. . . . Instead of long argumentative lines developed then presented all at once, we find point-for-point statements and

> rebuttals. The texts feel more like animated conversation . . . . [T]he rhythm of e-mail and mailing list exchange encourages opposing manifestos and summaries but also quick movement from what you just said to the arguments and presuppositions behind it. Positions get examined from a variety of angles, and there will be demand for backing on specific points. This makes e-mail a good medium for the kind of dialogue that Habermas speaks of, which demands justification for each speech act and inquires into the validity and sincerity of claims.

Kolb's comments here are particularly in reference to e-mail and mailing lists, but the communicative structure of CMC he observes is similar on Usenet groups, Web forums, chat lines, and other Internet media. Many thousands of individuals from around the globe are engaged in this sort of critical dialogue, putting forward and critiquing claims on every conceivable question on a myriad of online fora. My own observations of this lively exchange of opinions is supported by many other long-time observers of cyber-culture (Hauben and Hauben, 1997; Katz, 1997a; Rheingold, 1993). Hill and Hughes (1998:49, 58, 114) found, from their research of explicitly political Usenet groups and America Online (AOL) chats, that debates ('people with different opinions' clashing in 'a battle of ideas') make up the majority of the content in these online deliberations. The results of research into the actual extent to which dialogue takes place depend, of course, upon definitions and counting methods. Wilhelm's (1999) content analysis found that only around 20 percent of a random sample of 50 messages (from 10 political newsgroups) were actually directed to a previous message. In contrast, Rafaeli and Sudweeks' (1997) research of 44 randomly sampled bulletin boards found that over 60 percent of the 4322 messages responded to previous postings. Despite the discrepancies, it is clear that the medium facilitates the critical exchange required by the public sphere conception and that this exchange is taking place within many online spaces. Furthermore, the requirement for reasoned justification, as Kolb notes above, is also a frequent demand made by online discursive participants themselves, and one that is often satisfied. Katz (1997a:50, 190-191) claims to have witnessed rational online debates 'buttressed by information from Web sites, published research, and archived data', which he believes points the way towards the development of 'a more rational, less dogmatic approach to politics.' This is confirmed by Hill and Hughes (1998:125), whose research found that 'sourced' information was drawn upon in over 60%

of the 'political' Usenet groups they studied.[2] Wilhelm's (1999:173) study similarly found that three out of four postings on Usenet and AOL political forums provide reasons justifying their statements.

To conclude, then, it is clear that the exchange of validity claims with reasons is taking place within many online interactions. However, the deliberative quality of these instances of reciprocal exchange has yet to be determined. Accordingly, I will now investigate the extent to which such exchanges approximate the four other discursive requirements of the public sphere conception.

6.2.2 Reflexivity

Argumentation demands that participants be self-reflexive. Reflexivity, as used here, means being prepared to stand back from, critically reflect upon, and (when necessary) change one's position. This requirement is central to the deliberative process whereby private individuals are transformed into public citizens. Unfortunately, reflexivity is difficult to detect given that it is largely an internal process and changes in people's positions take place over long periods of time. Despite such difficulties, we can gain some appreciation of the level of reflexivity by looking at the structure and content of online debate.

For various reasons, and particularly in comparison to face-to-face conversations, the form of Internet exchange may be seen as facilitating reflexivity. For example, the effort it takes to put forward arguments in written form, in comparison to spoken communication, often encourages participants to think more carefully about their positions. This reflection is aided by the record of exchanges often available to participants in online debate which allows careful consideration of the development of the argument. Furthermore, online interactions are largely asynchronous exchanges and thus provide participants with time for reflection before presenting their own contributions. However, Internet debates also have a number of characteristics that could be seen as retarding the potential for reflexivity, most notably the bite-sized postings often involved, the non-linear structure of conversations, and the rapidity of the exchanges.

[2] While my concern here is with developing a general picture of online discourse, it is important to specify whenever possible the particular discursive format (chat, Usenet, e-mail list, etc) under consideration because variations across online fora, and particularly between different discursive formats, can be quite marked. For example, Hill and Hughes (1998:125) found that there was more than five times as much sourced information drawn upon in the Usenet groups than in the America Online chat rooms that they observed.

The rhythm of CMC, as Kolb (1996) notes, is such that shorter points are exchanged rather than longer position statements. The length of postings online is restricted by what Millard (1997:159) calls 'chrono-economic stress', that is, by 'the psycholinguistic effects of an online writer's awareness of the limits to the time, bandwidth, money, attention, and any other resources that he or she can devote to any given piece of discourse.' Bandwidth limitations discourage posting long articles. Cost restricts time spent online. Indeed, time itself may be the most limited resource people have, and may deter their participation in online deliberations altogether given that it takes longer to develop an argument through CMC than through face-to-face conversations or via the phone. Closely related to time limitations is attention. Readers will often skip or skim through posts that contain more than a few lines of text. These resource scarcities encourage 'bite size' postings. With CMC, Arterton (1987:173) argues, 'loss of nuance and detail are traded-off for brevity.' However, short posts do not necessarily translate into a lack of reflexivity, just as the publication of long position statements cannot be equated with its presence. Short posts not only maximize inclusion by giving others more opportunity to 'speak' but can also over time develop sustained arguments that accumulate much thought and reflection. Furthermore, the point-for-point engagement of much CMC can encourage thorough reflection by helping interlocutors to look at multiple aspects of their positions.

A second possible inhibition to reflexivity is the non-linear form of much CMC. Discussions can multiply, mutate, diverge, branch out, and overlap, undermining the ability of participants to follow and carefully reflect upon their own positions. Again, however, such claims often rely upon a fallacious assumption, the assumption that reflection requires linearly structured argument. This is not so. Non-linear arguments, common in offline contexts, can provide different angles by which to look at otherwise 'obvious truths.' Furthermore, a digital record of exchanges is normally available and this helps participants follow and critically examine ongoing debates in their own time and in their own way.

A possibly greater inhibition to reflexivity arising from the form of CMC is the high speed at which exchanges often take place. Rapid exchange limits the time available for deliberating upon claims and critiques. The sense of urgency developed in online interactions encourages this rapid turnaround. The urgency to reply quickly (and gain the limited attention of others) is greatest within synchronous modes of online communication (chat rooms and MUDs), where lines of conversation may disappear off the screen within seconds of being posted and multiple people may be speaking at once. The pressure to converse at speed in these forums is further increased by the fact that reputations can be

built simply on the ability to think and write fast. From their study of AOL chat, Hill and Hughes (1998:130) concluded that

> [c]hat rooms are a difficult format for thoughtful discussion. The short line space and the fast pace require people to make snap comments, not thoughtful ones. We see this in the low level of information and the small amount of issue discussion. Most chat room conversations appear to focus on the actions of people, not on the government and its role in society.

There is also pressure to reply quickly within asynchronous modes of online participation (Usenet groups, Web forums, e-mail lists), especially given that discussions tend to be dynamic, beginning and ending rapidly and moving off in new directions without much warning. Moreover, participants often feel compelled to respond to messages at a rate that reflects the speed of the network. Knowing that the medium cannot generally be held responsible for the type of delays that occur in the postal service, people may become annoyed with those they are corresponding with when replies are not received within a day or two of postings. Furthermore, Usenet messages *must* be read within a few days because they are held on servers only for a short time, and e-mail list messages *need* to be 'dealt with' or they result in unmanageably congested e-mail 'in-boxes.'

The rapid turn-around rate encouraged by both synchronous and asynchronous forms of CMC may be seen as limiting the chance for participants to carefully consider and re-develop their positions. However, a quick response is neither absolutely required (particularly within asynchronous modes) nor necessarily unreflexive. While the technology enables nearly instant communication and online discussions often seem to proceed very quickly, individuals learn to make the most of their postings, given the resource constraints of money, bandwidth, time, and attention. Furthermore, participants tend to take great care and time over postings, learning from their own (or other's) past and often embarrassing online experiences. Such experiences include sending posts to the wrong person, sending grammatically and logically incoherent posts, and being pulled up for badly misrepresenting other participants' positions. Participants may also learn that greater attention and respect can be gained through the quality rather than quantity of posts. Moreover, a quick response cannot be simply deemed unreflexive just as a slow response cannot be assumed to be reflexive. To get a better idea of the extent to which reflexivity is taking place within online exchanges we must turn to actual deliberations.

Reflexivity can be detected taking place within some online debates. Observers can witness moments and places when 'positions soften and change' (Katz, 1997a:49-50). Many participants within online fora are conscious of the self-transformative and democratic possibilities of cyber-interaction. Some explicitly see themselves as having been transformed through such interaction (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995). These individuals and groups demonstrate that the requirement of reflexive deliberation is not only possible but is to some extent taking place online. However, the level of reflexivity in most online fora falls well short of what is expected by the public sphere conception. As noted in the previous section, observations confirm that many participants are putting forward and vigorously defending their positions, as well as critiquing other positions. Yet few participants acknowledge the strength of criticisms directed towards them and even fewer seem moved to change or compromise their positions in the course of argumentation. Debates often turn into repetitive exchanges between dogmatic interlocutors unprepared to reconsider their values, claims, and assumptions. Usenet discussions, Streck (1998:44) observes, 'are woefully circular; discussion reduces to the same people saying the same things in the same ways.' Reflexivity needs to be increased in online discourse if the public sphere conception is to be more fully approximated. An important task in improving reflexivity is getting participants to listen respectfully to each other's positions, to see the argument from the perspective of the other. What is required is ideal role taking, the next public sphere conception to be evaluated.

6.2.3 Ideal Role Taking

Reaching understanding through communicative rationality requires ideal role taking, that is, being able and willing to see the problem from another's perspective. This requirement involves a commitment to an ongoing dialogue in which interlocutors respectfully listen to one another in spite of, and *because of*, their social and cultural differences. Cyberspace is a place where difference is not hard to find. The Internet as a whole is extremely plural. One can move between newsgroups, discussion lists, and chat lines, finding groups of every conceivable description. There is the opportunity online to encounter a much greater social diversity than is possible in most offline situations. Given this potential, what can be said about the level of respectful listening in online deliberative situations where difference is encountered? Moreover, what can be said about the extent to which individuals are prepared to commit themselves to such situations and to work through their differences, to undertake the *ongoing* ideal role taking required to secure understanding?

As already established, cyberspace is filled with vibrant exchanges of opinion. However, in general there tends to be far too much talk and not enough respectful listening. As Streck (1998) reports, the democratic responsibility or duty to listen to others is rare within current online discourse. Cyberspace 'on a day to day basis is about as interactive as a shouting match' (ibid:45). At worst, sites can be dogged by 'spam' and 'flaming', actions antithetical to respectful listening. Spam involves the same article or essentially the same article being posted an unacceptably high number of times to one or more online groups. Spam is most often found in the form of unsolicited postings of commercial advertisements (including inducements to pornographic sites) and 'get rich quick' schemes (particularly pyramid structured chain letters). Spam can also be used as a way of protesting against another participant or site, sometimes to the extent of jamming a server. Flaming, on the other hand, involves posting messages with abusive content. Of course, flaming and spam can overlap – abusive content can be repeatedly posted.

Spam is nearly universally condemned online. Although it can be highly disruptive, it involves only a minority of online participants and can often be quickly identified and dealt with. Flaming, however, is encouraged by the 'disinhibiting effects' of CMC and is more likely to be engaged in by participants in online discourse. As Arterton (1987:174) explains, 'the bounds of restraints are weaker than those normally found in social contact. More often than acceptable in face-to-face contact, participants will make snide and biting comments directed toward individuals they do not know or toward the whole group discussion.' In addition, with the possibility of rapid response, single flames can quickly escalate into 'flame wars' (Dery, 1994; Sproull and Faraj, 1997:40). '[O]nline writing's unique balance between bodiless abstraction and dynamic public drama creates a rhythm of attacks and responses that is all but guaranteed to amplify disagreement into dissonance, disturbance, and finally . . . full-fledged dissing' (Millard, 1997:148).

Hill and Hughes (1998:59) measured the extent to which the explicitly political discussion groups that they studied deteriorated beyond a minium level of acceptable democratic interaction by counting what they called 'flame fests': 'to qualify as a flame-fest, the majority of messages in the thread must be flames.' Individual flame messages that do not manage to drag the whole thread down with them were not counted. Hill and Hughes (ibid:57-62, 115) found that 39% of Usenet debates and 32% of AOL chat could be defined as a 'flame fest.' In contrast, however, Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) conclude from their research of bulletin boards systems (including Usenet) that 'content on the net is less

confrontational than is popularly believed.' My own online observations confirm frequent flaming within Usenet newsgroups, but not to the extent found by Hill and Hughes.[3]

The different levels of flaming found by researchers can be accounted for by the different definitions used to measure the phenomenon. There is a fine line between flaming and 'strong' rhetoric. Millard (1997) highlights these measurement difficulties in his discussion of his personal experiences on an academic electronic list where a meta-discourse about what constitutes flaming developed. Participants could not agree upon what counted as flaming and what as simply the 'energetic' or 'strong' rhetoric that is important to winning arguments in rational debate. As seen in Chapter Three, rhetoric may be part of deliberation as long as it does not lead to exclusion and inequalities. Whatever the definition (or measure) used, there is no doubt that a significant number of online deliberations have at one time or another been disrupted by abusive postings. Such disruption can encourage participants to seek out less antagonistic places to be online. Santa Monica's PEN, often seen as a model of cyber-democracy, has been affected by flaming to the extent that many participants abandoned use of the system's conferencing facilities (Dutton, 1996:275-278). Increasingly, as will be discussed further below, online fora are developing ways that deal effectively with flaming, particularly through the elaboration of rules of discourse.

A possibly more serious problem for rational deliberation is the ease with which participants can simply opt out of ideal role taking and so avoid commitment to the *ongoing* and rather demanding process of attempting to come to an understanding of different points of view. Some commentators argue that meaningful commitment to online groups is very difficult to develop and sustain due to the lack of bodily markers in cyberspace. The loss of grounded identity perceived within cyber-interactions, Robins (1996a:14) warns, undermines the ethical practices of real world intersubjectivity: 'it is the continuity of grounded identity that underpins and underwrites moral obligation and commitment.' Sclove (1995:79) likewise fears the abstraction of interaction from 'Real Life': 'electronically mediated communication filters out and alters nuance, warmth, contextuality, and so on that seem important to fully human, morally engaged interaction.' Nguyen and Alexander (1996:116) believe that cyber-interactions 'lack the responsibility of an actual bodily commitment' and thus cyberspace 'diminishes the range and quality of human encounters' needed in human-to-human association. Lajorie (1996:168) combines all these reasons for the lack of commitment to groups of difference, arguing that political collectivities as we presently

[3] The observations I refer to here are of the Usenet groups nz.politics, uk.politics.philosophy, uk.politics.electoral, mn.politics, and alt.org.promisekeepers over the period August 1997 to July 1998.

know them are undermined in cyberspace by 'the erosion of the local, the effacement of bodies, and the pure extension of interface.'

In contrast to such claims, however, Internet research has generally shown that strong commitment to online groups is possible, and can be observed, despite the hiddenness of bodies and the extension of interaction over time and place.[4] In fact, the lack of bodily markers can encourage people to get closer and lead to intimate and long lasting relationships. 'For many Net communicants it is the absence of a visual dimension that affords depth and an integrity to computer-mediated conversation' (Clarke, 1997:171). Internet studies and reports describe numerous very real online relationships where commitment to common causes develops. Participants may become so committed to others in online groups that they support each other in birth, sickness, and death. Research shows that these commitments develop in e-mail lists, MUDs, Newsgroups, and in commercial conferencing systems like the WELL. One would expect the least attachment to occur in chat groups, given their greater ephemerality.[5] However, even with online chat participants tend to return to the same 'rooms' to look for the virtual personas with whom they have developed virtual bonds.

Clearly, virtual communities of mutual support are developing online. There are literally tens of thousands of virtual communities in cyberspace, flourishing through e-mail lists, electronic bulletin boards, online chat groups, and role playing domains.[6] However, the interaction taking place through these communities does not generally translate into

[4] Studies and reports referred to here include Argyle (1996), Baym (1995, 1998), Correll (1995), Hafner (1997), Turkle (1995), Watson (1997), Wellman and Gulia (1999), and Wilbur (1997).

[5] Rheingold (1993:178) describes this ephemerality well: 'Chat systems lack the community memory of a BBS [bulletin board system] or conferencing system or MUD, where there is some record of what was said or done in your absence. Although words are written and broadcast (and thus can be electronically captured, duplicated, and redistributed by others), they aren't formally stored by the chat system. The discourse is ephemeral.'

[6] Many virtual communities are linked to mega-communities, Websites that host literally thousands of online communities. The OneList (www.onelist.com) mega-community boasts 280,000 communities while Six Degrees (www.sixdegrees.com/invite.asp) claims over three million members. Geocities (geocities.yahoo.com) offers Web space where tens of thousands of individuals and groups 'build' their homepages around 'themed communities' or 'clusters of interests' – 'communities of like-minded pages.' Geocities is now part of Yahoo, which also hosts thousands of online 'clubs' (clubs.yahoo.com/). Other mega-communities include Microsoft communities (communities.msn.com/home), Excite's community boards (boards.excite.com/communities/ directory), Lycos clubs (clubs.lycos.com/libe/Directory/welcome.asp), and Talk City (talkcity.com). (All sites last accessed 4/5/00.) These mega-community sites tend to be profit-oriented. They offer free space to public (that is, non-profit) virtual communities but sell space to advertisers attempting to target certain communities of interest.

enhancing the public sphere of communicative rationality. Participants in these groups are not necessarily moved to offer criticizable validity claims or forced to critique their strongly held assumptions. There is little demand on participants to engage in ideal role taking as these groups are relatively homogeneous, the perspectives of those involved are already similar and conventionally understood. Although they feature disagreements, virtual communities are often based upon people getting together with similar values, interests, and concerns in order to provide emotional support, companionship, and advice (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). The aim is to reinforce other group members, rather than to engage in critical debate. Recent research of online bulletin boards by Hill and Hughes (1998:72-74) and Wilhelm (1999:171-172) shows that even groups focused upon issues expected to involve diverse opinions often simply develop into ideologically homogeneous 'communities of interest.' Furthermore, those who browse the Web for information, who may be expected to encounter a myriad of challenging ideas on their journeys through cyberspace, tend to seek out information (often aided by information gathering software) that simply supports their personal interests and values.[7]

Of course, as already noted, there are online spaces where people do encounter and take part in discourse that challenges them to rethink their positions. But typically there is little ideal role taking involved in the arguments within these groups. In addition, when ideal role taking does take place, it is often short-lived. In comparison with offline groups, participants can leave a discourse with relative ease if disagreements become too challenging to their values or demanding of their attention. On many occasions, critical dialogues do not get much further than a few exchanges before drying up. This conclusion is confirmed by Wilhelm's (1999:174) study of AOL and Usenet groups oriented towards explicitly political issues, which found that 'sustained dialogue among all participants on a single topic or line of inquiry is uncommon.'

In general, it can be concluded that online interaction is largely fragmented into groups of similar values and interests and, moreover, that in online debate which does involve difference, respectful listening is rarely maintained to the extent necessary for coming to understanding. We cannot expect people to spend a great deal of their online time (and energy) confronting and listening to difference. It is unreasonable to expect that a major proportion of cyber-interaction will involve communicative rationality. However, to more

[7] Pew Center (1999) research shows that '[n]early one-fifth of Internet users get customized news reports and an equal number receive e-mailed news.'

fully exploit the plurality of discourse on the Internet for the enhancement of the public sphere, there must be spaces where a broad range of problems arising from living with difference are encountered by interlocutors who are committed to ongoing deliberations in which each party respectfully listens to the other's point of view. Few Internet forums at present involve any great proportion of such exchanges. More deliberative spaces are needed where participants are committed to respectful listening if the public sphere is to be enhanced through the Internet to any significant extent. Furthermore, to be meaningful, ideal role taking must be accompanied by openness (or sincerity) on the part of those putting forward claims and reasons. The extent to which this latter requirement is fulfilled in online discourse will now be examined.

6.2.4 Sincerity

For a position to be rationally judged within deliberation, participants must make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information and their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires. Intentionally misleading others about aspects of one's identity relevant to the discourse, or falsifying information about one's claims, undermines the process of reaching understanding. It is important to carefully examine the extent to which such falsification may be a threat to rational deliberation in cyberspace, particularly given the degree of control over the presentation of self and information made possible by CMC.

Identity remains ever salient within cyberspace despite the hiddenness of bodily markers. Identity online develops via multiple signifiers. One's e-mail address signifies gender, ethnicity, institutional affiliation, nationality, location, and so on. Language and writing style may indicate class, culture, and gender.[8] Nicknames are often gendered. The content of posts is riddled with identity cues, including the poster's interests, positions on various issues, lifestyle, and offline relationships. The signature that can be attached to the end of posts operates as one of 'the online world's most deliberate identity signals', often used to 'anchor the virtual persona to the real-world person' (Donath, 1999:40). All these signifiers build up identity online.

These signifying mechanisms indicate that offline identity seeps into cyberspace, whether participants like it or not. But these signifiers also provide participants in cyberspace with a marked degree of control over self-presentation. This control can encourage identity

[8] On the gendering of online communicative style, see Herring (1993, 1996). On racial identity as a feature of many online interactions, see Burkhalter (1999).

experimentation and the expression of parts of the self repressed in offline interactions (Danet, 1998:131). Yet, few online participants actually take up the opportunity of self-presentation in ways that are very different from how they portray themselves in real-life (Kitchen, 1998:83). Although performance of identity is an inescapable part of any interaction, explicit identity play is mostly confined to peripheral zones of cyberspace (particularly within MUDs and chat groups).[9] Research by Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) confirms a high level of voluntary self disclosure in online interactions. This explicit disclosure, together with the unconscious signifying of identity, indicates that the hiddenness of bodily identity markers in CMC does not necessarily undermine the public sphere requirement for sincerity.

Control over self presentation also offers opportunities for the conscious *deception* of identity. Deception here refers to neither the routine (and inescapable) performance of identity online nor to those cyber-sites where 'playing' with identity, including taking on multiple personas, is an acceptable (and often central) part of interactions. Deception in deliberation occurs in situations where a participant intentionally misleads others into believing that the participant is presenting (as honestly as possible) their true intentions, needs, desires, and interests. Such deception poses a serious impediment to rational discourse because it undermines the possibility that only the 'force of better argument' stands behind public opinion. Conscious deception aimed to mislead interlocutors is a widespread and often reported problem in online discussion groups. Sometimes called 'trolling', identity deception in cyberspace aims to embarrass, anger, and disrupt. It is often undertaken merely for amusement, but sometimes it is driven by more serious motives (such as a political cause).[10] Trolls infiltrate a particular group by assuming the identity of a person who would pass as a 'legitimate participant, sharing the group's common interests and concerns' (Donath, 1999:45). A troll may even attempt to impersonate an existing participant within the group concerned. After developing their 'false' identity and becoming accepted within a group, the troll sets about disrupting proceedings while trying to maintain his or her cover.

[9] O'Brien (1999) usefully differentiates sites of 'authentic fantasy' from sites of 'real authenticity', that is, sites where the intention is to 'perform' compared with sites where the intention is to 'be.' The former are more often found in MUDs and IRCs, while the latter is much more the case with e-mail, e-mail lists, Usenet, and the Web.

[10] Donath's (1999) compelling study of identity deception on Usenet offers interesting examples of trolling and the damage it can inflict on cyber-interactions.

Such identity deception undermines the trust within online groups. Suspicion of a troll can lead to participants re-evaluating how they post and how seriously they take other posters. Participants may become cautious about self-revelations and about believing the revelations of others. Participants may even decide to keep silent, or to withdraw altogether from the group concerned. In this way, trolls can cause much damage to online deliberations. To safe-guard deliberations, trolls must be exposed and ejected from groups as soon as possible. Of course, the risk of detection is the reason why many trolls play 'the game.' Furthermore, it can be difficult to detect well disguised deception. Fortunately, the costs involved in trolling tend to deter many would-be trolls. Trolling requires considerable time and energy in order to consistently control for all the different signifiers of identity that make up a non-contradictory character. It even requires being careful to post from an appropriate domain. For example, if playing as a ten year old a troll should not post from the university (.edu), business (.com), government (.gov), or military (.mil) domains. Ongoing care is needed as discrepancies in one's history of participation can be readily spotted.[11] One may even need to take on the idiosyncratic style of the group targeted to be fully accepted. Furthermore, some online public fora demand a level of identity verification that can make trolling more difficult, though not impossible since these verification systems are not yet full-proof. For instance, while participants on MediaMOO could give any name (persona) they pleased, they also could be identified through their e-mail addresses, which had to be supplied before an initial password was provided.[12] A Web page presence can be particularly troublesome for trolling. A Web page is frequently used to signal offline identity (age, race, gender, qualifications, and interests, and so on) in order to facilitate professional and social networking. The 'real' cost of altering this Web-based identity is often too high to make consistent trolling worthwhile. Finally, the detection of deception can lead to a variety of 'punishments', from humiliation of perpetrators via online publicity through to suspension from the group (and even the computer system) concerned. These impediments to trolling reduce identity deception. However, any amount of identity deception aimed at misleading other discursive participants can be a major disruption to deliberative proceedings, undermining the process of reaching understanding by the 'force of better argument', and so needs to be curbed as far as possible.

[11] Many e-mail lists are archived and can be searched through Web search engines. For instance, Deja.com allows Usenet databases to be searched from as far back as 1996. This allows the history of a participant's Internet postings to be retrieved, providing a detailed record for the building of a 'virtual identity.'

[12] MediaMoo is now defunct. It was an (unsuccessful) experiment in the mid 1990s to bring media researchers together in cyberspace via a MUD.

Other aspects of information deception may be even more pervasive online than the intentional misrepresentation of identity. Many discussion groups, including those dedicated to 'serious' political issues, face the problem of postings aimed to misinform, embarrass, self-promote, provoke, gossip, trivialize, and so on. Discussions of the arrest of Malaysia's deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, were dominated by sodomy jokes, racist slanging, and political personality-bashing (Erickson, 1998b:44). Usenet discussions are particularly full of conspiracies, propaganda, rumour, and scandal. They can be worse than television talk shows because posters do not have to reveal themselves and risk public humiliation as a scandalmonger. On the Web, documents, photographic evidence, and whole organizations can be readily fabricated. Warnick's (1998:321) study of political parody Websites, sites that utilize 'uncorroborated sources and digitized pastiche to make their point', shows that 'the Web environment lends itself particularly well to plagiarism, anonymous information, distortion, and digitized [distorted] images.' In 1996 conspiracy Websites claiming that the TWA flight 800 was destroyed by US Navy missiles were so convincing that even veteran newsman Pierre Salinger was duped into believing their validity (Selnow, 1998:173).

Online information may be falsified simply as a 'good prank.' At other times, some strong political motivation may lie behind misinformation online. The atrocities committed against Chinese-Indonesians during the Indonesian riots of 1998 gained increased attention and condemnation through Internet news reports, including postings of rape victims and their emotional testimonies. Unfortunately, unverifiable materials were posted. It seems that at least some of the material was fake, 'particularly photos that seemed to have been either downloaded from porn sites or were unrelated to the Jakarta incidents' (Erickson, 1998b:46). It is hard to know if these reports were posted to stir up popular sentiment against the human rights abuses or to undermine the credibility of the claims of abuse. Verifiable online evidence is often hardest to come by in cases where support for claims is most crucial. Websites reporting Kosovo-Serb news during the media blackout in Yugoslavia in March 1999 had to admit that the news sources were unverifiable, undermining to some extent the power of the stories posted.[13]

[13] One such site was Steven Clift's Kosovo Reports initiative at http://www.egroups.com/list/kosovo-reports/ (last accessed 10/8/99).

These verification problems can inhibit online interactions from realizing the deliberative requirement that outcomes are decided only by 'the force of better argument.' However, the problem does not have to be debilitating. What we are faced with here is a variation of the familiar problem of authenticating claims and supporting information, a problem that occurs in any deliberative situation. Just as with offline discussions, and as demanded by the deliberative conception, participants in online fora need to remain sceptical of unverifiable claims and information. This scepticism is evident in many online fora. Aware of the possibilities of fraud, participants often challenge any claims and supporting information that are not thoroughly substantiated. Although sometimes a difficult task, claimants are expected to provide convincing support (from either offline or online sources) for their assertions before their positions are accepted by other participants. Survey results from The Pew Research Center (1998, 1999) show that online users – just as in offline situations – are quite confident in discriminating between accurate and inaccurate information, good and bad arguments. However, it cannot be guaranteed that participants within online deliberations will detect deception aimed to mislead them. Thus, deception needs to be excluded as far as possible from online discourse, an exclusion that does not go far enough in many online spaces. I will now examine online interactions for another source of coercion that can inhibit rational deliberation: discursive inequality.

6.2.5 Discursive Equality

A common theme within Internet literature is that social hierarchies and power relations are levelled out by the 'blindness' of cyberspace to bodily identity, allowing people to interact *as if* they were equals. Arguments are said to be assessed by the value of the claims themselves and not the social position of the poster. Yet, as seen above, identity becomes just as salient online as off. This leads to the reassertion of authority and subsequently power differentials online.[14] In this section I will explore how authoritative power is re-constituted online and what limitations this places upon online fora realizing the public sphere requirement of discursive equality (and inclusion).[15]

[14] Power here is taken to be the capacity to transform a given set of circumstances (Giddens, 1979:88-94, 100-101). Authority, drawing upon Giddens (ibid:100-101), is one resource through which power is mediated and that generates command over persons. Giddens sees power as also mediated through *allocation* which refers to capabilities which enable control over material phenomena. I would add that there are possibly other mediations of power, for instance communicative rationality. For further discussion of power in terms of the public sphere conception, see my earlier discussion in Section 3.3.2.

[15] Exclusions *from* the Internet lead to, and in turn are reinforced by, inequalities *in* cyber-interactions.

Against Poster's (1997) contention that the Internet discourages the endowment of individuals with status, status develops online with every post even when offline identities are not revealed. Factors contributing to the development of the reputations of participants in online fora include: time spent online, displays of technical expertise, frequency of postings, style and tone used, consistency and reliability in reciprocating other posts, being a group moderator, and the extent of help offered to new users. As Donath (1999:31) explains in relation to newsgroups:

> There are people who expend enormous amounts of energy on a newsgroup: answering questions, quelling arguments, maintaining Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Their names – and reputations – are well known to readers of the group; other writers may defer to their judgement, or recommend that their ideas be sought in an argument. In most newsgroups, reputation is enhanced by posting intelligent and interesting comments, while in some others it is enhanced by posting rude flames or snide and cutting observations. Though the rules of conduct are different, the ultimate effect is the same: reputation is enhanced by contributing remarks of the type admired by the group.

Developing a positive reputation builds authority which in turn empowers certain individuals to do things online. The varying degrees of authoritative power that develop between individuals online contribute to a stratification of cyber-populations along the lines of 'cyberpower' (Jordan, 1999; Streck, 1998:39). These differentials of power are linked to and extended by offline social hierarchies and identities. The ability of an individual to assert authority online is inextricably linked to the extent to which they possess the resources (skills, time, money, and so on) necessary for success in cyber-culture. Moreover, online status is often directly reinforced by the revelation of offline identities which, as seen earlier, are readily brought into cyberspace. Participants often disclose their offline identity when it helps give weight to their online opinions. For instance, in a debate about educational reform, a participant may want to support his or her assertions by 'letting slip' that they were a highly qualified senior researcher working in a world renowned institution. As outlined above, there are many signifiers (language use, style, content of posting, and so on) that reveal identity in online conversations. One of the most common ways that offline status is brought online is through virtual signatures voluntarily attached to e-mail messages. These signatures can be used like a business card to advertise a poster's title, institutional affiliation, and contact details. Even the ISP within a poster's e-mail address acts as a signifier of offline authority. Educational or business addresses bring with them the status

of the institution whose name they bear, for instance mit.edu or ibm.com, while connection to a commercial system like America Online associates the user with 'amateur', 'home', or 'family' use. To bring even more detailed and verifiable credentials online, an individual can construct a personal homepage offering curriculum vitae, examples of their work, and links to other home pages with which they are (or want to be) associated.

The stratification of authoritative power means that some participants are able to make their voices heard more than others, leading to domination of discourse by certain individuals or groups and thus to discursive inequalities. Domination of discourse typically takes place in three ways: abusive postings, monopolization of attention, and the control of the agenda and style of discourse. The most rudimentary way in which some individuals or groups come to silence others is through abusive postings. Such abuse is often targeted at those with less power in cyberspace and predicably, given the ease with which offline identity and power are brought online, such targeting overlaps with those marginalized in offline discourse – new users, women, and non-white ethnic groups (Tadmore-Shimony, 1995; Cherny and Weise, 1996). Even when individual identities are unknown, racist, sexist, and other forms of abuse can be broadcast (spammed) to thousands of people through e-mail lists, Usenet groups, and chat rooms. Such abuse can be extremely upsetting for participants and can lead to their silencing and even withdrawal from cyber-interactions.

Possibly more pervasive and damaging to egalitarian discourse than direct abuse is the monopolization of attention by particular individuals and groups. In many groups a small number of participants are responsible for most posts while the majority of subscribers post infrequently or simply 'lurk' – reading messages without posting. Despite the disinhibiting effects of cyberspace, participation in most online groups is less than 20% of those subscribed.[16] Even within spaces explicitly oriented towards politics, 'lurkers' tend to outnumber active participants by at least 50%.[17] However, an uneven distribution of the number and length of postings over a group's population does not necessarily indicate discursive inequalities and exclusions. There are many reasons for lurking or posting sporadically other than the fear of being put down or not being listened to.[18] Furthermore,

[16] From research reported by Kitchen (1998:83).

[17] From my own participant observations and case study research – see Chapter Seven below.

[18] Reasons given for non-posting, from research reported by Kitchen (1998:83), include: reluctance to speak to unknown people, resistance to participate in a group formed prior to one's arrival, being unsure about disclosure of self, fear of participating wrongly or poorly expressing oneself, and fear of being evaluated and receiving negative criticism.

infrequent posters and 'lurkers' are not necessarily unengaged, passive, or non-participating. They may be as committed, attentively listening, and reflective as are frequent posters. Moreover, regular posters cannot necessarily be said to dominate discourse or to exclude other participants from posting. Formarlly, all subscribers to a group have an equal opportunity to post. In addition, given the lack of bodily signifiers, an online discussion's cohesion and very existence needs regular posters who can always be relied upon to have an opinion and so keep the conversation going. However, sometimes inconsiderate and noisy individuals do monopolize the very limited attention available in online discussions. As Watson (1997:107) identifies in his study of a Usenet group, online interactions may be dominated by a few 'excessive posters' who post for the sake of it, without having much to say. These posters tend to have the same identities (educated, white, English-speaking, and male) as those who frequently monopolize attention in offline conversations.

There are a number of ways to minimize abusive postings and the monopolization of attention. These will be considered below. More difficult to deal with, and thus more of a problem for achieving egalitarian discourse, is the qualitative domination of conversations by particular individuals and groups. Here dominant participants may not necessarily be abusive or say more; rather, they assert their influence and sideline other participant's views by dictating the agenda and style of dialogue. The dominant voices are those who have developed online authority, and these again tend to be educated, white, English-speaking males.

The development of online discursive inequality can be illustrated in terms of the stratifications that result from the reproduction of gender. Some feminists argue that the Internet offers increased powers of expression for women (Light, 1995). In particular, cyberfeminist polemics speak of online liberation through the transcending of 'real life' binary oppositions and essentialist gendering.[19] Yet gender is the most readily reproduced difference in cyberspace. 'RUMorF?' and 'stats?' (the statistics that describe a person's offline physical appearance) are two of the most popular questions within chat groups. Gendered stereotypes tend to be reinforced even where participants have the opportunity to experiment with identity. Online identity play is notorious for reproducing offline identity, with participants regularly cross-gendering in terms of 'Ken and Barbi' models (O'Brien,

[19] Sadie Plant (1996, 1997) exemplifies the cyberfeminist position. See Squires (1996) for an illuminating overview of cyberfeminist claims. Hall (1996) usefully contrasts liberal cyberfeminism and radical cyberfeminism, showing how cyberfeminist arguments generally fail to explain gendered online practices.

1999). Gender is not merely reproduced but 'intensified discursively', resulting in 'hyper-gendering' (Hall, 1996; O'Brien, 1999).

Numerous inequalities within online discourse follow from this gendering of participants. Observations of online interactions suggest that although women in cyberspace (compared with offline) often find it easier to get their voices heard and that men may be more receptive, women also 'still attract the unwanted attention of men, are still sexually harassed and receive abusive messages and are still expected to adopt the same gender roles as in real space' (Kitchen, 1998:68-69).[20] Although there are many spaces and dialogues which do not involve such direct abuse, men still dominate many online interactions in terms of the quantity of postings and their influence over what is said and how it is said. In particular, as Susan Herring's (1993, 1996, 1999) extensive research on gender and CMC shows, gendered inequality in online discourse arises from the dominance of a 'male style' of interaction. The male style is characterized by messages that are longer and more frequent, issue-oriented, assertive, authoritative, adversarial, sarcastic, and self-promoting. The female-gendered style, on the other hand, tends to be shorter, personally-oriented, questioning, tentative, apologetic, and supportive.[21] Research by Baym (1996), Savicki et al. (1996a), Soukup (1999), and Sutton (1994) supports these findings. The agonistic male style tends to be accepted and even encouraged in many online groups. The dominance of this style impedes women's participation, given that, compared to men, they are less accustomed to and willing to engage in such forms of interaction. Tired of being pushed aside and intimidated within online discourse, many women leave, become passive observers, post self-censored messages for fear of reprisal, or start women-only groups (Brail, 1996; Sutton, 1996).[22]

[20] For examples of such observations, see Adams (1996), Brail (1996), Hall (1996), Herring (1999), Sutton (1996), and We (1994).

[21] Herring (1996) argues that men's online communicative style is rooted in an 'ethic of agonistic debate', where truth is achieved through an adversarial process free from censorship. In contrast, women's styles tend towards an 'ethic of politeness' that values establishing equality in discursive relationships through support and encouragement of the other. These two styles reflect various aspects of communicative rationality and when combined can enhance it. On the one hand this requires, as Charles Ess (1996) suggests, that males moderate their communicative behaviour, to take seriously the perspectives, beliefs, values, and communicative styles of others. On the other hand, it requires that women be encouraged to participate more using the agonistic style.

[22] Rather than withdraw from the network, women who experienced harassment on Santa Monica's PEN 'formed a women's user group, PENFEMME, to provide social support and to reclaim the online space dominated by their harassers' (Light, 1995:139).

Investigations of gender-based inequalities and exclusions demonstrate how cyber-discourse often fails to approximate the requirements of equality and inclusion. However, some hope for deliberative equality can be found within online discourse. For a start, the extent of inequalities within online interaction varies widely across cyberspace. There are numerous deliberative online fora in which there is no noticeable abuse or domination.[23] Discursive inequalities may also diminish with the influx of women and other marginalized groups into cyberspace. Furthermore, the increasing formalization of netiquette (online rules of etiquette) may curb the worst excesses of online coercion.[24] These 'rules of discourse' promise to make cyberspace a much more egalitarian place.

Netiquette has been developed over time by Internet users (especially through Usenet) and system-administrators keen to make cyberspace a more congenial environment. Although different guidelines can be found throughout cyberspace, a few basic rules tend to get replicated, including: no posting of inappropriate material (determined by the group concerned), no flaming or highly abusive behaviour, and no excessively lengthy materials or excessive cross-postings (including spam) that will waste bandwidth.[25] Netiquette is sometimes (and especially on Usenet) enforced by self-regulation, that is, by participants of groups taking the responsibility to admonish offenders.[26] At other times, rules of discourse

[23] In contrast to their previous research, Savicki et al. (1996b) found no significant correlation between the number of males in a cyber-group and the use of language. Crowston and Kammerer (1998), from their research into gender style in CMC, report no difference in the way men and women respond to different styles online (that is, men are equally effected by the 'male style'). Witmer and Katzman's (1997) study, based on the content analysis of 3000 messages from 30 randomly chosen newsgroups and e-mail lists, found that although men tended to use more challenging language women were somewhat more likely to flame. For more on this international study of computer-supported collaboration, see Sudweeks and Rafaeli (1996). These discrepancies provide a useful reminder of the caution needed in generalizing too far from studies of limited aspects of cyberspace.

[24] The need to formalize netiquette stands in contrast to the initial belief of many cyber-enthusiasts that online interactions would develop towards an ideal form of discourse without the need for formal rules.

[25] See Sutton (1996) for a list of general netiquette rules and their relationship to classic etiquette rules. Different groups have different 'local decorum' depending upon their membership and purposes. What is defined as flaming by one group may be seen as acceptable practice by another. An extreme example of this is the Usenet group alt.flaming 'where violating decorum would mean engaging in a sober, restrained discussion' (Kollock and Smith, 1996:116-117). Group-specific rules may be contained in FAQ files and other documents of netiquette developed and distributed by the particular group, but in many instances they are informal and undocumented (Kollock and Smith, 1996:122).

[26] Self-regulation may be elaborately developed. LambdaMOO for instance operates a democratic process where the 'inhabitants' collectively develop social rules of interactive behaviour (including conflict resolution procedures) that amongst other things attempt to deal with online abuse. See Pavel Curtis (1997), the creator of LambdaMOO, for a full account of the MUD, and Charles Stivale (1997) for an account of its developing process of self-governance.

are made explicit and enforced by group moderators who have the authority to sanction offenders to various extents, from e-mail warnings to banning participants from entry.[27]

Such attempts to maintain a minimal level of reasonable interaction are undermined by a rising tide of cleverly forged posts, by users operating from rogue sites that do not maintain acceptable use policies, and by anonymous postings (Pfaffenberger, 1996:381-382).[28] Participants ejected from groups due to their continual violation of discourse rules can return through another Internet access provider and under a pseudonym. As a result, moderation may only have limited success. Hill and Hughes (1998:123) found that moderation of politically-oriented chats on AOL had little impact on flaming. Furthermore, a libertarian 'free speech' ethos permeates cyber-culture to such an extent that the acceptable behaviour norms of online conferences often tolerate dominant posters, moderate hostility, and even harassment.[29] That is, the rules of netiquette and the ways they are enforced are biased towards an agonistic style which reinforces domination and discursive inequalities.[30] Although most netiquette advises users not to 'shout' and to be polite (following the golden rule of treating others as you would have them treat yourself), flaming is seen as acceptable in some circumstances. Shea (1994:43, 71, 78), in her book that claims to explain how 'to be perfectly polite online', advises that flaming is not forbidden by netiquette. Flames are not just 'lots of fun, both to write and to read' but are also a useful tool for 'teaching someone something' or 'stopping someone from doing something (like offending other people).' In other words, flaming is an acceptable means efficiently dealing with annoying, abusive, and ignorant online behaviour. While netiquette typically advises not to reply immediately to a post that has made one feel angry, a flame is often seen as an acceptable response once the poster feels calm and rational about things. What is generally

[27] Chat channels are normally policed by chat room 'owners' who can inhibit entry and eject anyone they do not like from the room. MUDs have special classes of players called gods and wizards who control access and limit or extend various powers to users. E-mail lists also have an 'owner' with monopoly power over who can post and what is posted (sometimes approving every article before it is posted). In contrast, Usenet newsgroups are not 'owned' by any users and tend to be self-managed.

[28] There are various degrees of anonymity online. As Donath (1999:53) explains, '[a] pseudonym, though it may be untraceable to a real-world person, may have a well-established reputation in the virtual domain; a pseudonymous message may thus come with a wealth of contextual information about the sender. A fully anonymous message, on the other hand, stands alone' and, as indicated in Chapter Three, it cannot even be linked to a virtual identity. Such fully anonymous posts are usually used for privacy reasons.

[29] Some self-regulated groups are torn between advocates of libertarian free-speech and those who want greater regulation and sanctioning – see, for instance, Pfaffenberger (1996).

[30] Herring (1996) argues that this agonistic bias in netiquette stems from men's communicative style having an overwhelming influence in deciding what is appropriate behaviour online.

forbidden is extended flame wars, not so much because of their content but because they monopolize bandwidth.

In order to develop a 'safe' environment for self-disclosures and expressions of opinion, some Usenet groups, chat groups, and (in particular) e-mail lists have developed stronger norms against flaming than is the case in the conventional forms of netiquette that have been influenced by cyber-libertarian arguments (Baym, 1998). Some spaces actually go as far as to disallow anonymous postings. By doing so they aim to curb negative communicative behaviours that develop with anonymity. This rule has been seen as one aspect of the democratic success of a number of online communities including Santa Monica's PEN (Dutton, 1996), MediaMoo (Bruckman and Resnick, 1995), and The Well (Hafner, 1997).[31] However, even when rules of discourse are such as to eliminate flaming, they tend to say or do little about the risk that the agenda and discursive style may become dominated by certain individuals and groups.

Discursive inequalities continue to occur in online interaction, despite the so-called bracketing of identity, the development of netiquette, and moderation. Discursive inequalities result from the maldistribution of power in the wider society, a maldistribution that is reproduced in online relations. These inequalities may dissipate with time as more women and minorities come online and as the rules of discourse further develop. However, at present online discourses, including the very rules of discourse themselves, tend to be biased in favour of those individuals and groups that dominate offline discourse.

6.3 Cyber-Discourse and the Public Sphere: Summary and Problems

Analysis at the system's level in Chapter Five showed that although Internet access is presently limited, relatively autonomous communicative interaction can and does take place throughout cyberspace. This chapter considered whether this semi-autonomous communicative interaction translates into discourse that approximates the requirements of communicative rationality maintained by the public sphere conception. I have found that there are many spaces and instances where the basic structure of rational debate can be

[31] With the online community The WELL, Hafner (1997:104) explains, anonymity was disallowed in order to reinforce openness. Everyone's real name was made available on the system. The proviso 'you own your own words' greeted members each time they logged on. In addition, everyone who signed up was invited to write a personal biography of any length to reside permanently on the system.

observed, where the thematization and critique of validity claims are taking place. These communicative acts confirm that the Internet is facilitating, in some very general way, an enhancement of the public sphere. However, observations of cyber-discourse also show that 'confrontation, misinformation, and insult . . . characterize many public forums on the Internet' (Katz, 1997a:190). In many respects, the quality of online argumentation tends to be deficient. Apart from the exclusions from cyberspace and corporate and state control of the Internet highlighted in Chapter Five, a number of significant problems are limiting the ability of online discourse to enhance the public sphere. These problems include: limited reflexivity, a lack of respectful listening and commitment to working with difference, the difficulty verifying identity claims and information put forward, and the domination of discourse (both quantitative and qualitative) by certain individuals and groups.

Some hints as to possible solutions to these problems have been alluded to along the way. The three most significant mechanisms for moving online discourse towards the desired results arise from the technology employed, the 'rules of discourse' instituted, and the type of forum management undertaken. In terms of the technology employed, the actual technological artefact (the hardware and software of the Internet) produces a bias towards some uses over others: it encourages certain forms of online interaction rather than others. For instance, synchronous chat-group software promotes more rapid exchange than asynchronous computer conferencing systems. It is thus important to develop, adapt, or choose technology that maximizes communicative rationality. Rules of discourse can also be used to structure discourse. For the purposes of enhancing communicative rationality, these rules can be developed with reference to netiquette which, like the requirements of communicative rationality, has evolved from communicative practices. However, netiquette does not (at this stage of its development) directly map onto the presuppositions of communicative rationality. Netiquette contains a bias towards particular, agonistic forms of discourse. As such, netiquette needs to be modified so as to draw out the presuppositions of communicative rationality within online discourse. The type of forum management employed can also have significant impact. In particular, forum management can shape discourse by the way it chooses to police the rules of communicative exchange and by taking a lead role in setting the tone of the discourse.

These solutions, and others, can be further explored and developed through online spaces that are explicitly dedicated to enhancing rational deliberation. A number of 'best practices' spaces deliberately attempt to pull together the most public sphere enhancing elements of free-for-all cyber-forums, in a similar way that a public meeting focuses the rational

deliberation that may be found sporadically in everyday argument and debate. In the following chapter I will select and evaluate such organized cyber-democracy projects.

Chapter 7 Case Study of Citizen-Led Online Deliberative Projects

7.1 Introduction

An increasing number of 'independent' online projects are attempting to facilitate democracy through the Internet, drawing together and extending the best elements of the deliberations found within everyday cyberspace. This chapter focuses on two exemplary or 'strong' cases of citizen-led online deliberative democracy in order to look more closely at how the present Internet may be fully utilized to advance the public sphere.

The two online projects chosen as exemplary cases are Minnesota E-Democracy and United Kingdom Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD). Minnesota E-Democracy has been selected because it is one of the oldest and most successful online democracy discussion projects and because it closely fits the deliberative model of politics. This case allows for a more detailed consideration of how to overcome the problems (identified in Chapter Six) that limit the full realization of the public sphere conception in the free-for-all interactions in cyberspace. UKCOD has attempted to run both discussion groups and official consultation through the Internet. This case, then, is particularly useful for investigating how online opinion can more effectively feed into official publics and influence decision making.

This chapter begins with Minnesota E-Democracy, briefly looking at its success in terms of the requirements for inclusion and autonomy before thoroughly exploring its deliberative fora with an eye to the remaining (more discursive) aspects of the public sphere conception. I then consider the extent to which the public opinion developed in such spaces can effectively influence official decision-making, using UKCOD as my central case study. Finally, I examine the success of such online deliberative spaces in attracting public participation. This will lead me once more to consider the requirements of inclusion and autonomy.

It is important to specify at the outset the focus and methods of the case studies to be undertaken here. First, my aim is to find solutions to the particular problems identified in Chapter Six rather than to provide a comprehensive overview of the particular projects themselves. Second, while attempting to be open to meaning and unexpected possibilities, the analysis is not purely 'inductive' but rather is strongly guided by the evaluative

categories of the public sphere conception given in Figure 2.2. Third, the analysis draws upon a wide range of methods which are not confined to qualitative approaches, as is sometimes assumed of case studies.[1] As outlined in Chapter Four, the methods that prove useful include a descriptive analysis of site structures, qualitative and (limited) quantitative content analyses, and semi-structured interviews (online and offline) with 'key informants' including project organizers, participants, and researchers. These methods are supported by secondary documentation, including reports, press releases, and other independent research. I proceed via an open, reflexive process of data collection, as is exemplified by my semi-structured interviews with key informants. Each interview guide was completely rewritten in the light of the previous interview and after identification of the areas and problems still requiring exploration.

7.2 Minnesota E-Democracy

7.2.1 Introduction to Minnesota E-Democracy

For Minnesota E-Democracy project founder and Board Chair, Steven Clift (1997a), what is disappointing about the application of the Internet to 'real life' politics to date is that the Net has largely been used for interest group promotion rather than as an interactive public space where individuals can deliberate with each other on important issues, and where the media, government, and the private sector can also listen in and take part.[2] Clift (1997b) argues that online political projects 'need to move from the one-to-many toward a many-to-many communication scheme. . . . We need what I call the civic participation centre or interactive public commons, or citizen participation centre.' This is where Clift believes the Minnesota E-Democracy experiment comes in. Since 1994, Minnesota E-Democracy has attempted to

[1] Yin (1989:23) points out that case study analysis is often erroneously equated with ethnography or participant-observer methods. My analysis fully complies with Yin's (ibid) description of the case study method as an empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

[2] Steven Clift is a key informant for this case study. As well as being founder and Board Chair of Minnesota E-Democracy, Clift is also an ardent campaigner for deliberative-style electronic democracy. Since 1997 he has travelled throughout the world promoting a model based on the Minnesota experience. His 'campaign base' at http://www.e-democracy.org/do/ (last accessed 10/7/00) provides an insight into his vision and a link to the very informative Democracies Online Newswire – an e-mail list through which he keeps interested parties up-to-date with global online democracy developments. He is also adviser to the Markle Foundation's Web White & Blue 2000 project that links election-related information sites in the USA. His ideas and enthusiasm have influenced many of the online democratic projects in existence today, including the UKCOD project that I use as a case study in the second half of this chapter.

develop online deliberative spaces and to facilitate public opinion formation. The project is variously described by its most influential founders (and 'builders'), Steven Clift and Scott Aikens, as an 'online interactive public space', a 'wired' or 'electronic agora', 'electronic commons', 'electronic town hall', 'electronic public sphere', 'electronic town square', and a 'corner coffee shop' (Aikens, 1997, 1998a; Clift, 1997a, b, c; Clift, 1998a, b; 1999a).[3] The homepage of Minnesota E-Democracy declares that it provides an 'on-line civic space' where 'members have the rights and responsibilities associated with open discussion and highly public exchange.'

Given this interest in promoting online deliberation, Minnesota E-Democracy provides a 'strong case' by which to look more closely at the possible facilitation of the public sphere conception through the Internet.[4] I utilize the case here to focus upon how the problems facing online public deliberations highlighted in Chapter Six may be overcome. I begin by providing a general outline of the project and then briefly look at the project's relationship to the two aspects of the public sphere that were explicitly considered in Chapter Five: the extent of autonomy from the state and corporate coercion, and the accessibility of the communicative spaces produced. I then compare Minnesota E-Democracy with the five aspects of the public sphere conception considered in Chapter Six, seeking solutions to the problems identified there.

7.2.2 Overview of Minnesota E-Democracy

Minnesota E-Democracy has attempted to develop online deliberative spaces through the use of e-mail lists. The project also has a Web base that offers a directory of what is on offer and an archive of past discussions.[5] The project has recently begun to experiment with Web based forums (Web-boards) in parallel to lists.

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[3] Scott Aikens is another key informant for this case study. He shares an interest with Clift in building public spaces online for participatory democracy. Aikens joined Minnesota E-Democracy in 1984, motivated by what he considered an exciting experiment in developing an online public commons. On the project he wore the hats of organizer, participant, and researcher. In 1994 he configured, created, and managed that year's E-Debates for US Senator and Minnesota Governor elections. His PhD (1997) is based on a case study of this early experience. He returned in 1996 to organize the Minnesota E-Democracy US Senator E-Debate. As well as being involved in Minnesota E-Democracy, he is a founding member of UKCOD and maintains an advisory role in the project. He has also been adviser to a number of other Internet-democracy projects, including online strategist for Nexus, a UK centre-left 'think tank' that has successfully linked its deliberative forum into policy making through online consultation of issues like the 'third way' (Aikens, 1998b).

[4] The project does not claim to promote the specifically *Habermasian* public sphere conception that I have developed in Figure 2.2. However, interviews with Steven Clift and Scott Aikens confirmed that they see their Dewey-influenced model of a public commons as parallelling the Habermasian project.

The discussion list MN-POLITICS-DISCUSS (MPD or, before April 1999, MN-POLITICS) has been at the heart of Minnesota E-Democracy.[6] Since 1994 participants have come together through the list to discuss politics and public policy related to the state of Minnesota. The list had stabilized (by early 2000) at just over 500 subscribers with around 10-15 posts per day. MPD is now supported by a moderated announcement-only list for civic organizations in Minnesota to promote their events.[7] This latter list split off from MPD in the middle of 1999 but by early 2000 had already gained over 579 members. Before the announcement list's formation the one list, MN-POLITICS, had catered for both discussion and announcements. MPD has become the model upon which Minnesota E-Democracy has begun to build 'community issues forums' within Minnesota that combine discussion and announcements. As of January 2000, three such forums had been initiated. Minneapolis Issues Forum (MPLS-ISSUES) was launched on 25 June 1998 to focus upon Minneapolis City issues and by early 2000 had 260 subscribers and was averaging 7-10 posts per day.[8] Two similar forums began in 1999, focusing upon St Paul's and Duluth issues, attracting (by early 2000) 130 and 55 subscribers respectively, although both have yet to reach the required volume of posts to sustain vibrant debate.[9]

With the help of partner organizations, Minnesota E-Democracy has also run 'special events' focusing upon elections. In 1994 it offered the world's first election-oriented Website and ran the first organized election-oriented online debates. It has since held election events in 1996, 1997, and 1998, with more planned for the 2000 presidential elections. These events offer news, voter information, media coverage and comments, and E-Debates between political candidates. The E-Debate offers a focus for the special event. It consists of

[5] Minnesota E-Democracy homepage is at http://www.e-democracy.org/ (last accessed 17/8/00). For those who want to keep up with developments at Minnesota E-Democracy, a low volume e-mail list for special announcements is available. This list has around 1300 members and can be subscribed to from the homepage.

[6] MPD can be found at http://www.e-democracy.org/mn-politics/ and is archived at the EGroups service http://www.egroups.com/politics.mpt (both accessed 4/5/00). Until April 1999 the list was called MN-POLITICS, but when the announcement specific list began it was renamed MPD. I use MPD and MN-POLITICS to refer to the list before and after April 1999 respectively. For the sake of 'lurkers' the list is also offered in digest form, MN-POLITICS-DIGEST.

[7] The announcement list is archived at the EGroups service, http://www.egroups.com/politics/mp (last accessed 12/3/00).

[8] MPLS-ISSUES can be found at http://www.e-democacy.org/mpls-issues and has been archived since January 1999 (last accessed 12/3/00).

[9] See http://e-democracy.org/stpaul and http://e-democracy.org/duluth (both accessed 7/4/00).

questions sent to political candidates followed by their responses and rebuttals.[10] These are all posted to a moderated list (MN-FORUM) for citizens to view (but not for general posting). This list drew around 500 subscribers in 1998 (Clift, 1998a). MN-POLITICS has been used for citizen discussions of the ongoing debates.[11] In 1998 an invited media panel responded to the debate each week, but this may not be repeated given its lukewarm reception from MN-POLITICS participants: 'some people liked it and others thought it was too traditional' (Clift, 2000).

All this effort is in aid of fostering an online public sphere. To what extent, then, does the project foster the public sphere conception set out in Figure 2.2? In order to answer this question, I will investigate each requirement of the conception in turn. For the most part this investigation focuses on the five discursive requirements scrutinized in Chapter Six. However, I will begin with a brief examination of the two aspects of the conception that are explicitly inhibited by systemic imperatives: the accessibility of cyberspace and the extent of its autonomy from state and corporate interests.

7.2.3 Inclusion and Autonomy

As emphasized in Chapter Five, online spaces can only be *semi*-autonomous because of their location within a wider social field that is dominated by state and corporate interests. However, Minnesota E-Democracy has gone some way towards demonstrating that the increasing colonization of life by instrumental reason can be held back. Minnesota E-Democracy's mission statement claims that it is 'a non-partisan, a non-profit, volunteer-based organization whose mission is to improve participation in democracy in Minnesota through information networks.' It is not affiliated to any political party, interest group, or private concern.[12] Nor does it accept commercial advertising or any advertising unrelated to the forum, though it does accept advertising of political events. In terms of the de-linguistified media of administrative power, the forum's autonomy from direct government interference is largely secured through the US constitution and its 'guarantees' of freedom of

[10] The questions asked are developed after consultation with the MN-POLITICS list. In the 1998 debate, list members were invited to submit questions. Forty five questions were submitted which were culled and combined by organizers until they had six questions for the debate. It is proposed to run a citizen poll to choose 4 of the 8 possible topics for the 2000 debate (Clift, 2000).

[11] In 1998, so as not to clutter the more general discussions on MN-POLITICS, a new e-mail list was opened for public discussion focused on the ongoing E-Debate, but participants decided they would rather stay on MN-POLITICS to discuss the debate (Clift, 2000).

[12] Of course, Minnesota E-Democracy is still political in the sense that its aim is to promote a particular political arrangement over others.

speech and association. Minnesota E-Democracy thus utilizes the commercial-state controlled infrastructure and technologies of the Internet and yet is able to maintain a certain independence. This autonomy could possibly be further increased given adequate financial support. Commercial advertisements have become an element of every post since May 1999 when Minnesota E-Democracy decided to use the services of eScribe.com. EScribe hosts online discussion forums at the cost of accepting advertising banners attached to e-mail posts as well as to Web pages. While the general consensus among participants has been to simply ignore these advertisements, more funding would help Minnesota E-Democracy employ its own staff and technology so that it could avoid compromising the public nature of its efforts.

The requirement of inclusion is also inhibited by systemic colonization. As seen in Chapter Five, many people are denied access to the Internet due to 'informal' restrictions. Minnesota E-Democracy is positioned within the wealthiest nation in the world with one of the highest proportions of Internet-connected citizens. Minnesota State encourages public access to the Internet. Numerous public access terminals are provided throughout the state (Clift, 1997b). Still, as Clift (1998a) admits, present access restrictions mean that Minnesota E-Democracy, along with most other online fora, cannot be a fully representative space. Those involved in the forums are overwhelmingly the educated middle classes. While such unrepresentativeness can largely be blamed upon systemically induced exclusions, online forums like Minnesota E-Democracy can help to offset their impact. In particular, how the form of debate within such fora is structured has a significant effect upon the degree of democratic inclusion. This will be considered more extensively below, especially when looking at the requirement for discursive equality.

I have here no more than touched upon the problems that stand in the way of increasing autonomy and inclusion within online public deliberations. As I argue below, these two requirements of the public sphere conception are the hardest to fulfil for an online deliberative project. I begin here, however, by concentrating upon the other five requirements of the public sphere conception looked at in Chapter Six. I focus on how the project attempts to structure online public discourse and whether or not it manages to overcome the specific sorts of problems outlined in Chapter Six.

7.2.4 The Structuring of Online Political Culture within Minnesota E-Democracy

Minnesota E-Democracy is explicit about its purpose of maintaining more structured dialogue than can be found in most other online fora. According to the MN-POLITICS home page, the project

> seeks to build a forum that is informative, useful, and participatory. It is stressed that other forms of electronic communication, like Newsgroups and WWW-based conferencing, offer alternative forums for free-wheeling debate.

Minnesota E-Democracy aims for 'quality' discussion, for 'serious and useful online political deliberations', avoiding the anarchy of Usenet and other forums (Clift, 1999b). Project organizers have attempted to structure such discussion by choosing an appropriate combination of 'tools.' The particular way in which deliberations are managed, the rules imposed, and the choice and use of technology all contribute to the way online deliberations take shape.

E-mail lists were chosen over other Internet communications media because they offer a 'push' technology. Clift (1997a) explains that, being push technologies, lists themselves are active, meaning that people do not need to make the effort to link into the forum each time they go online (as is required with Web forums, Usenet newsgroups, and chat groups). E-mail is also the most popular and easy-to-use online tool at present. As Clift (1997b) emphasises,

> The lowest common denominator on the Internet is e-mail . . . . People spend an hour a day on e-mail, two hours a week on the Web. It's relevant and they're interested in it. Getting it into their e-mail box is really important.

E-mail lists also facilitate the structuring of more formal, well mannered, and focused discussion than can usually be found within Usenet and other online forums. The 'list owner' has ultimate control over who can contribute to the list and what is said. As a result, it is generally accepted by those joining a list that they behave within the boundaries or rules set by the list owner. Participants themselves often encourage strong list management, not wanting to waste time dealing with unwanted e-mail. Minnesota E-Democracy also has a Web homepage that provides a space where the e-mail discussion lists are displayed, accessed, and archived and where the purposes, expectations, and rules of the project are formally set out.

Despite the control offered by listserv technology, project organizers have chosen to have the list 'managed' rather than 'moderated.' The manager, unlike a moderator, does not pre-approve each e-mail sent to the list. They do not have an 'editorial function.' Instead, they keep an eye on the list and help *guide* it towards achieving its goals of deliberative exchange. This includes helping members enforce the rules and guidelines. It also involves providing

the encouragement and support that will foster positive contributions.[13] Most importantly, the list owner encourages forum self-management so that a sense of participant ownership can develop and lead to self-sustaining deliberations.

List rules and guidelines provide the main tools for management of forums.[14] They have been modified with time, and in consultation with members, to sustain democratic exchange. In his Doctorate, which includes a case study of the first few months of Minnesota E-Democracy, Scott Aikens (1997) tells of how rules came to be developed in the 'early days' of the forum. He recalls the threat to the forum posed by a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi activist. To protect the group, the rules of participation had to be clarified: '[s]pecifically, it was necessary to codify the rules and institutionalize a procedure for removing list participants unable to accept the rules' (ibid:138). A six month suspension from the forums (one year in the case of MPLS-ISSUES) can now follow from either a breach of a rule after one warning or serious and ongoing violations of list guidelines. However, members are encouraged to take responsibility for guiding each other (particularly new members), via private e-mail, as to what is deemed suitable posting content and style.[15] Guidelines in particular offer a set of standards of online behaviour (netiquette) for the self-regulation of the list: '[t]hey provide a framework for MPD participants to hold each other accountable to the purpose and goals of the forum' (Clift, 1999b).

The distinction between rules and guidelines was clarified in 1999 when both underwent re-formulation.[16] The rules are taken as addressing those more objective matters that can be clearly defined and enforced by list management. The guidelines, on the other hand, address those more subjective judgements (particularly relating to the content of posts) that can be more easily regulated by self-management practices (Clift, 1999b; MPD homepage). In

[13] See former MN-POLITICS list manager Mick Souder's comments on the duties of list owners, posted to the list on 8/1/99 and archived at http://www.escribe.com/politics/mpf/index.html?mID=2327 (last accessed 15/5/99).

[14] Most of the forums now simply refer subscribers to the MPD rules and guidelines.

[15] One guideline specifically asks participants to 'guide others – members need to help others get used to the culture, guidelines, and rules of the discussion forum.'

[16] A draft set of revised rules and guidelines, written by the Minnesota E-Democracy Board, was sent out in April 1999 to all subscribers of MN-POLITICS for comment and suggestion. Debate was facilitated by an informal discussion list made available to those who wanted to chat with other participants about the proposal. See http://www.egroups.com/list/mn-politics-rules (last accessed 20/11/99). This consultation took place over four months before the board of Minnesota E-Democracy made the final decision as to the new rules and guidelines.

some cases the difference between rules and guidelines can be a matter of degree and emphasis, with the guidelines backing up the rules. For instance, while one rule states 'No Attacks or Threats . . .', there is a similar guideline supporting this that states 'Be Civil.' Similarly, the rule to 'Sign Posts' is backed by the guideline 'Introduce Yourself.'[17]

Rules and guidelines combine with the listserv technology and forum management practices to provide the basic structure for deliberations. What is the success of this structuring? To what extent are the problems facing online public deliberations (identified in Chapter Six) overcome and the public sphere conception realized? I will explore this question in detail by comparing the actual online deliberations of Minnesota E-Democracy with the five discursive conditions of the public sphere conception evaluated in Chapter Six. The deliberations will be examined via a number of methods. These include, as outlined in Chapter Four, the qualitative (and limited quantitative) analysis of postings, participant interviews, and an analysis of site structure (software, layout, rules imposed, and so on). Two main sources of data are used: archived postings on MPD (or MN-POLITICS) from 1997 to 1999;[18] and the observations of key informants collected from public talks, publications, online postings, and semi-structured interviews.[19] These primary sources are backed up by a secondary literature, mostly consisting of press reports and interviews.

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[17] Developed from reflection on nearly five years of experience, the modified rules and guidelines offer a useful insight into what organizers and participants felt has been useful for facilitating a virtual public sphere. It is interesting to note that the rules and guidelines developed from experience in cyberspace generally, and in Minnesota E-Democracy specifically, have many similarities with those developed by discourse theories of offline communicative interaction. This is not surprising if cyberspace is thought of as part of everyday communicative action.

[18] MPD has been used as the representative Minnesota E-Democracy forum for my observations because it has been running successfully for much longer than the other lists and has become something of a 'blueprint' for their operations. However, I was also subscribed to, and observed the interactions on the MPLS-ISSUES forum for four months from its inception in mid-1998. Furthermore, during 1999 I read the archives of MPLS-ISSUES and the St Paul's Issues forums.

[19] As noted above, Steven Clift and Scott Aikens are key figures in the development of Minnesota E-Democracy (and in online deliberative projects globally) and the central participants in the present case study. I attended and recorded public talks Clift gave in Wellington (Clift, 1997b) and Belfast (Clift, 1998a), interviewed him in Belfast (Clift, 1998b), have followed closely his regular Internet postings promoting democracy online, and discussed this research with him via e-mail. I interviewed Aikens in May 1998 at Cambridge University, have followed his public postings to various online democracy e-mail lists, and have read his PhD, which uses the early Minnesota project as a case study to look at CMC and democracy. As both organizers and participants, Clift and Aikens can contribute a unique perspective on the project. It is also important to get the views of other participants because the role of organizer can blur the participant experience. Other participants who have contributed valuable insight into this research via e-mail dialogue include members of the Minnesota E-Democracy management team: Eva Young and Erik Hare (who review all of the posts of the announcement-only list). In addition, all posters to the MPD list contributed via the public postings that I was able to observe.

7.2.5 The Five Discursive Conditions

Thematization and Critique of Criticizable Moral-Practical Validity Claims

Chapter Six found that the requirement for the thematization and critique of validity claims is largely fulfilled within many online public discourses. I will therefore discuss this requirement here only so as to confirm its approximation within Minnesota E-Democracy discourses.

Minnesota E-Democracy aims to build an online deliberative fora where reasoned claims relating to the concerns of those living in Minnesota are put forward and critically assessed by others. This aim is promoted by the use of listserv technology (enabling the exchange of positions) and by the combination of guidelines and list management (that encourage high quality and well reasoned debate on Minnesota issues).[20] From my observations, the dialogue that develops in Minnesota E-Democray's discussions generally follows this reciprocal format, with participants putting forward for critique well substantiated positions on Minnesota topics. Posts on Minnesota E-Democracy are well developed in comparison to Usenet, chat groups, and other more anarchic cyberspaces. Moreover, posts tend to be reciprocated and substantial critical discussion often develops, sometimes ranging over a number of days or even weeks.[21] Topics discussed on MPD include immigration, tax laws, guns, sodomy laws, abortion, environment, freedom of information, education, housing legislation, poverty, and public radio. Topics discussed in the first few months of the MPLS-ISSUES list included 'airport noise, affordable housing, the quality of Minneapolis tap water, taxes, downtown development, and politics at the city, country and state levels' (Lohn, 1998).

Discussions do not always stay focused upon Minnesota public issues. They do sometimes stray off into national or international topics, or into debates about abstract political ideologies. They even at times veer off into gossip and trivia. As Eric Hare (24/1/00, e-mail correspondence) notes, discussions can 'quickly ossify into irrelevance' and 'personalities.' However, when posts do stray from the required format the offending parties are usually

[20] The definition of what happens to be 'political issues' is deemed the responsibility of each of those in the group.

[21] Bonchek's (1997) research indicated that over half of the messages posted to the MN-POLITICS list did not receive a response. However, once announcements (that make up about a quarter of messages) are removed from the equation, it is clear that a large proportion of posts are in fact reciprocated.

quickly reminded by the list manager and other participants to keep on task. For instance, Clift posted the following message to MN-POLITICS (8/2/99) to steer the discussion back towards Minnesota politics after a more abstract philosophical debate had begun:[22]

> While philosophy cannot and should not be disconnected from politics it is important that participants on the MN-POLITICS forum do their best to relate their comments and ideas to specific Minnesota issues and events. The more specific one is in terms of specific legislative proposals the more this forum will serve its designed mission. So please let's try to tie our conversations to specific proposals and debates around the state capital and other public decision-making bodies.

Keeping critical debate going fulfils the requirement that claims should be put forward and rationally critiqued. Reasoned discourse, however, requires more than the reciprocal critique of reasoned political claims. Another central requirement is reflexivity.

Reflexivity

As noted in Chapter Five, many online political debates involve participants merely promoting their own hardened position. In such cases, participants are unprepared to rethink their position in the light of what is posted by others. They ignore their own ideological biases and weaknesses. Minnesota E-Democracy's forums are not immune from this. There have been the typical squabbles between pre-set left and right positions. In one early case, MN-POLITICS was dogged by a group of libertarians who agitated against the communitarian ethos prominent on the list. The problem was not the fact that they favoured a more anarchic form of cyber-interaction but rather that they tended to push their own ideological position without listening to what others had to say (Clift, 1997b).

Such unreflexive argumentation is against the spirit of Minnesota E-Democracy. The project stresses that the forums are 'more about open exchange and information sharing and not about being right with one's ideology. Attempts to "win" an online discussion are discouraged"' (Clift, 1999b; see also Aikens, 1997:137). The aim is to build 'strong' citizens through useful and thoughtful debate. This requires reflexivity, with participants being prepared to evaluate and transform their own pre-deliberative ideas through critical

[22] Minnesota E-Democracy's lists are public forums and I am using quotations as they can be referenced in the public archives.

argumentation. The development of such an attitude within deliberation can be a slow process. As Clift (1997b) notes,

> I think it takes three or four months for someone participating in this to actually change their mindset from, "I'm just going to tell you what I think", to, "boy there are all those different opinions out there, maybe I'll just listen a bit, or maybe I'll think a little more before I push reply and say." (Clift, 1997b)

Despite the slowness (and often hiddenness) of the process, there is plenty of evidence for the moulding of opinions, to a greater extent than in 'less organized' online spaces. This evidence indicates that reflexivity develops within Minnesota deliberations. Aikens (1997:88) found that 33% of those who responded to his survey of MN-POLITICS said that the discussions did affect their thinking in some way, including changing the way they voted. Some of those that responded 'no' qualified this by saying that the forum allowed them to become more informed in their decision-making. This survey evidence of reflexivity is supported by personal accounts. Erik Hare, replying (8/5/99) to concerns expressed on MN-POLITICS regarding the value of the discussions, wrote:

> this list has given me a chance to hear other voices that I don't necessarily agree with who have forced me to change some of my views in the light of powerful arguments.

What enables this reflexivity? It is the very act of deliberating with others holding different ideas – the putting forward of one's ideas, being challenged about them, and being faced with new positions. This is particularly true in the case of Minnesota E-Democracy's forums due to the high level of critical argumentation set by both forum management and participants. The quick and poorly-thought-through response possible with CMC is significantly curbed by the expectation of 'quality' interaction that is emphasized in the forum guidelines (including an appeal to take the time to reply carefully) and also by list managers and individual participants. The critical engagement taking place on the lists encourages new participants to present their positions carefully and to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments. An important ingredient in this process has been the insistence upon, and development of, respect for different positions within the forums. Participants come to change or re-think their claims as they carefully listen to others. I will now consider in more detail the fostering of respectful listening and the commitment to difference within the Minnesota E-Democracy project.

Ideal Role Taking

Clift (1997c, 1997b) emphasizes the centrality to the project of participants' willingness to respect and listen to others and to communicate responsibly. He believes that Minnesota E-Democracy's deliberations have slowly fostered this willingness. An example of this development is provided by the case of the libertarian 'attacks' mentioned above. Although it took three months for the list to recover from the resulting disruption of the initial libertarian onslaught, Clift (1997b) reports that the libertarians actually stuck with the group and became less dogmatic in their posting style.

Mutual respect in deliberations is fostered by list managers and participants through appeals to the forum rules and guidelines. Explicit abuse is formally ruled out in all forums:

> No Attacks or Threats – Highly personal attacks or publicly threatening the safety or security of participants in a post to the forum is not allowed. If you receive private e-mail from another participant that causes serious concern, you may inform the DRM [Discussion Rule Manager]. If you feel you have received an illegal threat via e-mail, we ask you to contact the appropriate legal authorities. (MPD homepage)

Guidelines support respectful behaviour in a more positive way. MPD's guidelines, for instance, advise participants:

> Be civil – E-mail unto others as you would have them e-mail unto you. Respect each other's right to express themselves. Personal one-on-one arguments, disagreements, and personality conflicts must be taken from the public discussion forum and dealt with in private. Please avoid personal insults, name calling, and inflamed speech for the sake of argument. If you cannot respond to the issues raised, do not take the easy path of attacking the messenger. Again, discussions should focus on the public policy issues raised and NOT on the participants themselves. Avoid posting when you are generally angry or upset. (MPD homepage)

Such rules and guidelines provide a structure by which list managers and participants together can minimize flaming and maximize respectful interaction. However, flaming is not avoided altogether in Minnesota's forums. Given the diverse political views expressed and the argumentative structure of dialogue, it is not surprising that things have become over-heated at times. Disputes have developed to the extent that people have chosen to

unsubscribe themselves. In April 1999, for instance, some participants left MPD due to the tone and content of conversations.[23] These exits were precipitated particularly by one disruptive incident. A new user, writing under the pseudonym Biff Perrywinkle, sent in a number of provocative posts to the list. Wary of a troll, other participants, particularly Renee Jensen, privately questioned Biff's identity. Biff took offence to this and publicly criticized Renee and the list manager. Moreover, s/he transgressed list rules by publicly disclosing the list manager's private e-mails dealing with the incident.[24] The list manager was then forced to deal with the dispute and with the violation of the private posting rule. As a result of the controversy, a newcomer to MPD, Warren Thomas, noted (8/5/99),

> this looked like an interesting site for a while but the majority of posters lately are out of control and the bickering is just too much. I'll check back another time and see if it cleans up but from the looks of it, it won't.

However, things were not as bad as Thomas believed. Other participants were involved in thoughtful discussions at the same time, ignoring the Perrywinkle exchanges. In fact, the list was possibly in a lot healthier state during Biff's provocations than it had been at earlier times in its history. As Dan Rosenberg, a regular participant of MPD, notes in reply to Thomas' concerns:

> you haven't seen nothing if you think this is bad. I can recall when everyone was fighting on nearly every post. On this page I've been called every name in the book. Remember my famous comment about "balls" and the uproar it caused from those that didn't have any? Well, let me tell you, compared to before, this is civil. I will admit that after you've been called an asshole and right wing extremist you do want to get back at them, but life is too short to worry about an e-mail list. Sometimes it is just easier to take the time to be creative rather than crass.

Rosenberg observes a large improvement in the civility of the group. From my own observations, Thomas' complaint seemed rather exaggerated. The problem had been mostly due to one individual not following the rules. The disturbance quickly dissipated as list

[23] The list manager at the time, Eva Young, reveals this turn of events in a plea to the group (8/5/99): 'Folks—there are lots of unsubscribe requests today. . . . [P]lease consider, rather than unsubscribing, make the list a good list.'

[24] Protection of privacy on Minnesota E-Democracy lists is aided by the rule: 'no forwarding private messages to the list without permission of the author.'

manager and other participants referred to the list's rules and stressed the need for respectful exchange.

Problems regarding respect for others do continue to arise from time to time (further considered below under discursive equality). However, disputes tend to be worked through.[25] Despite the argumentative structure and differences of political position, the forums succeed in producing relatively (compared with similar Usenet groups like Mn.Politics) well mannered, on-task deliberations where people are more often than not actively listening to each other. As Clift (posting on MN-POLITICS on 9/2/99) reflects,

> The most important things I have seen come out of these discussions is a willingness to open oneself to diverse opinions and perspectives as well as a growing respect for people with differing opinions.

Minnesota E-Democracy embraces the clash of ideas while attempting to avoid personal arguments and attacks. The idea is not to arrive at consensus, but to encourage respectful listening to difference that will lead to greater understanding and the development of each person's own position (that is, the building of strong citizens and public opinion). As Steven Clift notes, in a debate about online public spheres that took place on the el-democracy list (30/6/97),[26]

> The notion of a need for consensus in that [MN-POLITICS] space would kill it. The value of this public space is that people who do not agree actually communicate with each other. Our guidelines and rules for the forum attempt to encourage respect and a willingness to listen to others' views. Respect and exposure to diverse viewpoints is what makes this a worthwhile experience. Perhaps over time groups will cleave off and do work on the side because they agree on something, but without the interactive center – digital cross roads for Minnesotans interested in politics – where would folks meet?

[25] See Aikens (1997) for a discussion of how the list worked through flaming and other problems in its 'early days.'

[26] El-democracy is a low volume discussion list hosted by the *European Commission's Information Society Project* to enable the exchange of ideas about electronic democracy. I have been a subscriber and participant in the group since 1996. The forum can be found at http://www.ispo.cec.be/ispo/elecdemodl. html (last accessed 14/7/00).

While enabling participants to discuss important issues that effect them as Minnesotans, the forums avoid the interest group fragmentation that Chapter Six indicated is a common feature throughout cyberspace. On the various lists, one can observe debate on a myriad of Minnesota-related topics from diverse political positions across and beyond the left-right spectrum. Moreover, participants seem to be prepared to continue to engage in communication despite their differences, demonstrating an ongoing commitment to working with difference. This commitment is indicated by the length of time individuals stay posting to a group. On MN-POLITICS, of the 96 members who posted in April/May 1997, over 50% (49) posted over a year latter (May to July, 1998). Of course, posting does not necessitate listening or an attempt to understand others. A further indicator of participants' commitment to understanding other perspectives within Minnesota E-Democracy is the extent to which people read posts. 88% of respondents to Aikens' (1997) self-selecting survey of early MN-POLITICS users said that 'they read the contents of MN-POLITICS either "all of the time", "a great deal of the time" or "a medium amount of time."' For an intense, diverse, mediated, and time-consuming political forum, this retention rate of actively listening participants is very encouraging.

How does Minnesota E-Democracy encourage and sustain this commitment to ongoing listening to difference? First, minimizing conflict and abuse is a key to developing a positive attitude to ideal role taking. Second, the use of e-mail lists, compared to other online forum tools, encourages sustained participation. E-mail lists require the most active commitment because one has to deal with all messages to a forum and 'once you join a list you have to make the decision to unsubscribe in order to leave the "online public space"' (Clift, 1997a). As an e-mail in-box is for many a personal space on one's computer, subscribing to an e-mail list is a personal commitment to the given forum (Aikens, 1997:97; Clift, 1997b).

Perhaps most importantly, however, Minnesota E-Democracy locates its deliberations within offline 'real' politics. This 'locatedness' overcomes the dislocation of cyber-forums that, as seen in Chapter Six, can undermine ongoing deliberations involving difference. Location of discourse in 'real' politics provides for commonality that motivates listening and can help bring about greater understanding. A shared sense of location is encouraged by Minnesota E-Democracy in various ways, including by keeping discussions focussed upon local issues, bringing civic groups into the forums and encouraging them to make announcements of their activities, and by bringing political representatives online (normally via special events).[27]

[27] The development of the announcement-only list, in parallel with the discussion list MPD, has improved the number, quality, and diversity of substantial political announcements (Clift, 2000).

Minnesota E-Democracy, Clift (1998a) argues, aims to go beyond the fragmented groups bonded only by shared interest on the Internet. It aims to utilize the Internet to build a civic space based on shared geography – that is, on localized politics. A favourite saying of Clift's (1997b) is that 'when I go online, it's not just about going to the world, it's also about coming home.' Clift (1998c) argues for 'embracing geography' as a vital component of the Internet: 'real communities using virtual tools will facilitate public communication on issues starting in our neighbourhoods and local communities and going up to regions and states as well as the national level and among people from many nations.'

Clift (1997a) refers to this promotion of citizen participation in 'real', geographically-focused politics as 'the "glocalization" of the Internet.' This glocalization has been central to sustaining participant commitment to Minnesota E-Democracy forums. As Clift (1997b) explains:

> We find that the geographic base promotes community and responsibility. You may run into these people. We've had picnics. We've had happy hours. People say, hey, let's get together. It's one of the most diverse political groupings you'll ever see around a table. I mean, I've never experienced it before being involved in this.

By situating deliberations in relation to local politics, participants are more likely to follow the discursive rules that enable an ongoing dialogue with difference. As Aikens (1997:136) explains,

> emphasis on concrete structures that are local is a powerful mechanism that increases the likelihood of adherence to normative values associated with the status of participants as citizens living within the proximity of these concrete issues, activities and institutions. There is a very real incentive to adhere to normative values if one is involved in a discussion with individuals who are or could be a part of one's community life.

Minnesota E-Democracy seems to have successfully developed a central online space where participants are committed to ongoing interaction with those who hold different points of view. The 'maturity' of the forum is such that it has 'achieved community.' However, the differences of opinion on the forums mask the fact that this community may have degenerated somewhat into a 'social clique' that is 'not very easy to join' (Eric Hare, e-mail correspondence 24/1/00). In fact, the differences encountered on Minnesota E-Democracy's lists are rather more limited than is the case in the respective offline populations. Although

there are a myriad of topics discussed by participants holding a diversity of political positions, this diversity does not extend very far in terms of identity. List participants tend to have well above average educational backgrounds and similar types of occupation – what could be called symbolic analysts (Aikens, 1997).[28] Furthermore, participation is dominated by white men. The MPLS-ISSUES forum, notes Minneapolis resident Craig Cox, is 'enlightening' but is 'mostly dominated by white, middle-class, liberal neighbourhood activists (I know many of them). I'd like to see a little more diversity of opinion' (cited in Lohn, 1998). Such homogeneity of identity reduces the differences most of those involved have to face, smoothing the way for their ongoing commitment to respectfully listening to others within the group.

The lack of representativeness within Minnesota E-Democracy's forums, and what can be done about it, will be further explored below. For now we can say that this project is in the *process* of successfully building a central place where all Minnesotans can engage in respectful dialogue aimed at understanding others. I have outlined the various ways in which Minnesota E-Democracy has developed reasonably civil deliberations and committed participants. There is one further way by which ongoing respectful listening to difference has been fostered within Minnesota E-Democracy: the insistence upon openness (or sincerity) with regards to identity and interests. An absence of such sincerity would make a mockery of ideal role taking.

Sincerity

Minnesota E-Democracy expects participants to represent themselves and their interests truthfully. To help ensure this there is the 'signing posts' rule:

> Sign Posts – All MPD posts must be signed at the bottom of *every message* by the author with at least their real full name, e-mail address and city of residence. Use of pseudonyms, anonymous postings or using other people's identities is forbidden.

Though often having to be reminded, participants are reasonably compliant in signing their name, e-mail address, and city. The use of anonymous postings or other people's identities

[28] Aikens (1997:86) sees involvement by occupation as dominated by what Robert Reich calls 'symbolic analysts', those who are involved in 'solving, identifying, and brokering problems by manipulating symbols.' According to Reich, this category includes include research scientists, design engineers, software engineers, public relations executives, investment bankers, lawyers, strategic planners, systems analysts, publishers, writers and editors, journalists, and university professors. Aikens' sample population from MN-Politics fitted Reich's symbolic analysts with few exceptions.

is extremely rare on MPD. Posters *have* at times in the past used pseudonyms. Authors on MN-POLITICS have designated themselves 'concerned citizen' and 'sanity is for wimps anyway' (Aikens, 1997:104). The forum manager and participants tend to challenge those posters who seem to be operating under a pseudonym to verify their identity. This is particularly the case if their posts are attention-grabbing or do not seem to be from a Minnesota resident. For instance, Biff Perrywinkle's provocative posting on MN-POLITICS in early 1999 led to his/her identity being questioned by both list participants and the list-owner. Renee Jensen, as mentioned earlier, was particularly concerned. Her challenge to Biff is revealed in her post to the public list on 8 May:

> I posted two things asking Biff to identify himself (since his postings have Pacific Daylight time on them I figured he wasn't from around here) and he has responded saying I am attacking his sexual orientation and lots of other things. I have no idea where all that is coming from. Biff, no one on this list knows you and it's nice to know a little bit of people's background so you kind of know where there [sic] posts are coming from. We've had a number of people on this list over the years who have used pseudonyms or pretended they were a public figure. Since your posts are rather strong, I was hoping you would share some info on yourself so we would know a little bit about you. If you're not willing to share, fine. But since I know nothing of your background or experiences I will disallow your input because I have no idea who you are or why you're posting to this list when you are not from Minnesota.

Of course, since she is not list-owner, Renee could not 'disallow' Biff's input. She is able, however, to challenge Biff to more fully 'come out' by identifying more verifiable aspects of his/her offline identity. As shown in Chapter Six, list participants can go through a number of checks to help verify if a person is using their offline identity (for example, using a legitimate sounding name and watching for consistent content and style). Of course, there is no way of *absolutely* verifying identity, especially if the poster maintains a consistent 'front.' But there is really no need to authenticate identity if the poster concerned is not attempting to deceive or 'cause trouble.' Biff continued to argue that s/he was using his/her actual 'real life' name, but after the initial outburst, his/her controversial postings tapered off (indirectly confirming the challenge Renee and others had made), and so the verification of his/her identity was no longer as pressing.

Few such incidents have taken place on Minnesota E-Democracy's forums. Clift (2000) reported to me that 'no one has ever used a fake or borrowed identity effectively.' Up until

1998 there had been no experiences of participants lying about their identity in order to get away with actions unacceptable to list culture (Clift, 1998a). Only two people have been suspended from the list, and only one of these for refusing to sign their name.[29] Warnings have been given to others who have disregarded the signing rule and other rules, but this has either led to the person concerned leaving of their own accord or deciding to abide by the rules.

Most participants are happy to reveal their 'real' world identities and interests, given the 'real' political nature of the deliberations. The forums are about meeting with 'real' people, many of whom already know (of) each other offline, and discussing issues faced within the offline community. There is little point 'faking' identity or, at least, no point in performing an identity different from that played out in offline life. The revelation of offline identity and interests has been further encouraged by a guideline asking people to introduce themselves to the group:

> Introduce Yourself – Participants are asked to post an introduction to the forum within one week of their first post and again yearly during the month of their birthday. The introduction need not be extensive, but please share some of your background and issue interests. Full time "lurkers" are encouraged to introduce themselves as well. Please use the subject line: Intro: Name – New Member or X Year Member.

Unfortunately, this guideline has not yet been followed to any great extent (Clift, 2000). However, many participants introduce themselves in some way or another in their postings. They often do so with a 'coming out' statement such as 'I have been lurking on this list for some time and . . . .' At other times they introduce themselves more formally, and include a personal history or resume.

The public sphere requirement for sincerity applies not only to identity but also to the sources of information used to support claims. Minnesota E-Democracy is well aware that truthful supporting information is necessary for successful deliberation. The MPD guidelines state that '[a]ll posts should be as accurate as possible and never intentionally false.' Of course, such a guideline alone will not guarantee the posting of 'truthful'

[29] The other suspension was for intentionally posting three times in one day, an action transgressing the two posting rule referred to here when discussing Minnesota E-Democracy and discursive equality.

information. As I showed in Chapter Six, it can be hard to differentiate accurate information from both rumour and conscious fabrication in online postings. However, on the whole deliberations in Minnesota E-Democracy forums are supported by more verifiable information than is the case in other less organized online cyber-forums. There are two reasons for this: the locatedness of the forums, and the higher demand for on-task and backed-up posts. I will expand upon each of these factors in turn.

The geographical locatedness of the forum not only puts at stake the reputations of those participating (whose offline identities are likely to be known by some on the list) but also allows participants to draw upon shared offline information sources. For a start, there are the 'first hand' personal accounts of list participants and those they know. Participants often refer to local events (including public meetings) that they have witnessed or been involved in and people they have talked to – events and persons that cannot be easily fabricated. Then there are media reports and other local secondary sources that can be used for verification. The mass media offers a very important source of information for supporting claims. Participants regularly (and critically) refer to television, radio, and newspaper reports on Minnesota issues. Clift (1997b) estimates that about a third of the online discussion is in reaction to what is in the media of the same day. Participants also draw upon information from Internet sources, including mass media sites. Minnesota E-Democracy's own Website provides links to relevant information sources on the Web, including a guide to media and news sites, directories for access to hundreds of Minnesota political sites, and a list of local political parties. The project's announcement-only list also provides participants with local political information. This list provides a space for official bodies and civic organizations to post public policy and legislative information, to put forward meeting agendas, and to make presentations on issues of public interest.

Along with these various means for data verification, the sincerity of claims and supporting information is furthered by the fact that participants share an expectation for 'quality' debate. Participants expect the forum to lift itself above the level of content found in other online fora. They are there to take part in intelligent and well substantiated debates. New participants sooner or later become aware that unsupported ideological rants and musings are inappropriate in the forums and will be unkindly looked upon. A critical eye is maintained by management and participants alike for poorly supported arguments that may lower the level of debate. This can be seen in Karl Bremmer's (23/6/98) questioning of a story ('Laurie-in-the-cake') by Renee Jensen about a local politician:

> When making accusations about someone BY NAME, you better be prepared to back it up with verifiable information or sources on this list. If that's not your style, Renee, stick to Usenet where that type of McCarthyism runs rampant. The whole sorry episode of the Laurie-in-the-cake story was an embarrassment to this list because of your refusal to divulge your "proof." Your end of the thread sounded like the crap that proliferates on newsgroups. . . . [However,] I doubt that this [incident] happened because of your refusal to provide a source or evidence. If it can't be proven or verified by some means other than saying "I've heard but I won't reveal my sources to the enemy," as you have, better keep it off-list until it can.

Renee replied by asking for the list to clarify the rules and responsibilities of participants to back up their observations, opinions or information with references. Paul Lareau asked how vulnerable sources in the political arena could be protected if they were to be revealed. No conclusion was reached. However, these exchanges demonstrate the challenge in wait for anyone making strong unverified statements. As expected in the model of communicative rationality, the validity of claims raised and the supporting reasoning and information are continually challenged.

Overall, the level of deception about identity, interests, and information on the forums of Minnesota E-Democracy is minimal. As in offline deliberations, there is always the possibility that participants will hold back relevant interests and information that should be open for the rational assessment of claims. All that can be done is to keep fostering a culture of openness and respect. Minnesota E-Democracy participants are generally supportive of this endeavour and are prepared to encourage each other in the development of open deliberations free from hidden agendas. All information, claims, interests, intentions, and identities that are brought into the discussions are put under scrutiny by list members. This critical openness is aided by the list rules and guidelines and by the fact that the project is locally situated. Sincere discourse does not however guarantee discursive equality, a further requirement of the public sphere conception that will now be examined.

Discursive Equality

A central aim of Minnesota E-Democracy is to encourage a situation in which the full diversity of political views in everyday life can be expressed and respected. Against the liberal pluralist model of competitive lobbying between narrowly-defined interest groups, Clift (1997a) insists that

> [t]he main purpose of a citizen-based effort is to bring people together with diverse opinions and backgrounds for electronic interaction and discussion of public issues deemed important by the participants.

In order to give all voices a reasonable chance to share the limited 'attention' resource, some rationing of allowable postings is required. Like turn-taking procedures of face-to-face interaction, Minnesota E-Democracy has instituted a 'two messages per-day' rule. This rule was developed after early experiences of MN-POLITICS, where a few participants were dominating the list by their prolific posting.[30] The rule had the desired effect of encouraging more people to participate. As Aikens (1997:166-167) reports,

> after the successful implementation of the two-message-per-day rule, there was a dramatic change in patterns of participation. The length of threads remained consistent, but there was a decrease in the number of messages per thread and an increase in the number of authors per thread.

The rule has continued to be strictly enforced, with the addition in 1999 of the warning that '[i]ntentional violation of the two posts per day rule will result in immediate removal from the discussion forum for six months without a warning.'[31] The two posts rule limits the monopolization of discourse by a few individuals. Unfortunately, however, participation is still distributed unevenly. MN-POLITICS has always had a core group of dominant posters. Bonchek's (1997) research during the period from May 1st to July 15th 1996 showed that the ten most active participants posted 40% of the messages; the top twenty percent of posters accounted for 60% of messages. In 1998, as seen in Figure 7.1 below, one third of posters (41 posters or about 10% of total list subscribers at the time) posted 83% of messages. This group of regular posters seems to have remained fairly constant. From the 276 posters over the year 23rd October 1998 to 22nd October 1999, just 28 posted 75% of messages.[32] At the same time there are significant numbers of lurkers on the list. For the three months recorded

[30] For a fuller account of the development of the two-messages rule, see Aikens (1997).

[31] As well as reducing the monopolization of the forum by a few individuals, this rule contributes to the reduction of flaming because people cannot carry on rapid duelling in public (Clift, 1998a). The rule supports the requirement that participants take their personal disputes off the public forum and into private e-mail.

[32] These ten percent of posters posted over 50 posts each for the year.

in Figure 7.1, around 80% of the more than 400 subscribers failed to post.[33] Of course, we would expect a higher participation rate over a full year. However, over the year 23rd October 1998 to 22nd October 1999, only around 50% (276 of approximately 450) of subscribers posted.

Figure 7.1 Statistics on MN-POLITICS for 1 May – 3 Aug, 1998.

x messages posted	no of posters	% of Posters	no of posts	% of posts
0 < x < 2	37			
		68	280	17
2 < x < 11	46			
10 < x	39	32	1347	83
	122	100	1627	100

This skewed distribution of posts – a few prolific posters and many lurkers – does not necessarily mean that some participants are inhibiting others from airing their views. As seen in Chapter Six, a variety of reasons other than coercion or intimidation can account for why some subscribers either do not post or only post irregularly.[34] Some Minnesota E-Democracy subscribers aim to simply keep an eye on public debate (this apples in particular to the journalists, politicians, and legislative staff that have subscribed to the list). Hence, we cannot assume that quantitative differences in the distribution of individual postings mean that coercion or intimidation is limiting expression or even that discursive inequalities are present.

[33] Participation rates may have dropped as the number of subscribers has increased. Bonchek (1997) found that from May 1st 1996 to July 15th 1996, 50% of the 266 subscribers had posted a message on MN-POLITICS.

[34] Time can be the biggest constraint on being an active participant (whether as lurker or poster). As Robert Rafn (9/5/99) notes in his post to MN-POLITICS: 'After being a member of the Mn-Politics list for probably close to a year, I guess it's time for me to say adios – no particular reason other than finding it takes an enormous amount of time out of each day for me and right now I need the time for other things.'

What about the differences between online and offline demographics pointed to earlier when discussing ideal role taking? How representative of the wider population are these Minnesota forums? Do their demographics indicate discursive inequalities and exclusions? Gender is the most obvious demographic discrepancy. In MPD there are far more men subscribed and participating than women (if we assume that the gender of signatures is indicative of offline gender). From the 122 participants who posted between 1st May and 3rd August 1998, 74 had male names, 19 female, and 29 non-gendered (unidentifiable gender, organizations, and listserv management). This means that, excluding non-gendered participants, approximately 80% of posters were male. Similar results were obtained for the longer period, 23rd October 1998 to 22nd October 1999, where 72% of posters were male. Aikens (1997:84) reports similar ratios of male to female participants in the forum in 1994. On average, males also tended to post slightly more than female participants, with 21 posts per male participant and 16 per female participant for the year 23rd October 1998 to 22nd October 1999. This means that although 72% of posters were male, 77% of the year's postings (again leaving aside the non-gender-associated posts) were by these male participants. Other demographic discrepancies include educational and occupational background. As noted above, Aikens' (1997:90) research shows that 'symbolic analysts' made up of information professionals dominate Minnesota E-Democracy. Ethnic minorities are also poorly represented in the forums (Eric Hare, e-mail correspondence, 24/1/00).

The lack of representativeness within Minnesota E-Democracy's deliberations can be seen as a result of the systemically induced access restrictions outlined in Chapter Six. As online participation becomes increasingly universal, we would expect identities in Minnesota's online deliberations to more fully reflect the offline identities of the state's population. But in the case of gender there are already approximately the same number of females as males online in Minnesota.[35] Why would women be less inclined to participate in the form of political discourse offered by Minnesota E-Democracy? Do coercion and discursive inequalities figure within the online deliberations?

My observations and interviews indicate that women on MPD do, at times, find the list intimidating. Some women fail to post, or do not post often, or change their style of postings, or attempt to join a women-only group, or leave the list altogether because they feel dominated or intimidated. Erik Hare admits that 'male-ness is always an issue, as it is

[35] Nielson Netratings survey of Internet users found that by May 2000 as many women as men in the United States were using the Internet, although males still tended to spend slightly more time online. See http://63.140.238.20/press_releases/pr_000706ac.htm (last accessed 20/8/00).

everywhere online', but insists that 'there's always a woman [or supportive male] to step up on an issue when it gets out of hand.'[36] Renee Jensen, who sees herself as a voice that 'won't be silenced', is one such woman. In a post to MPD (18/3/98), she summarized what she feels is the atmosphere for women on the list:

> Most of the time the women's comments on this list are "stepped over" unless the woman says something feisty that raises somebody's blood pressure. Then they're called "cute" or are encouraged to go back to lurking.

The day before this posting, Jensen had argued that women on the list were silenced, belittled, or simply ignored by some men. She added that some male posters over-reacted to and insulted women. She reveals that although she is prepared to stay and 'take the heat', other women on the list are responding by 'discussing having their own get together away from the guys who enjoy talking down to us, belittling our input, and telling us to be quiet.' Mitch Berg (18/3/98) and Karl Bremer (18/3/98) replied to Renee that women should learn to tough it out just as men have to – 'if you can't stand the heat stay outta the kitchen.' This challenge seeks to silence other ways of conducting discourse. It may be true that the men on the list have to put up with just as much abuse as the women. Yet, even if this is so, the argument fails to take into account the different styles of communication that, through gendered socialization, men and women are conditioned to negotiate. As seen in Chapter Six, agonistic debate tends to be more easily dealt with by men.

In sum, then, the respectful dialogue and low level of abuse generally found within Minnesota E-Democray's forums do not ensure equality and inclusion. As seen in Chapter Six, some individuals tend to dominate cyber-deliberations in terms of quantity of postings and by (often unconsciously) imposing their style of posting on the group. This discursive domination seems to be contributing to the lack of representativeness within Minnesota E-Democray's forums. While not much can be done by Minnesota E-Democracy about wider social restrictions to Internet access, the project has already demonstrated that there are ways to make deliberations more inclusive of the voices of under-represented groups, such as through the 'two posts' rule and guidelines that encourage respect. More ways to provide greater equality and inclusiveness need to be developed if the public sphere conception is to be more fully approximated through online discourse.

[36] Personal correspondence, 24/01/00.

7.2.6 Summary of Minnesota Study

Minnesota E-Democracy is a project very much located in the everyday life of those involved. The project emphasizes the 'truthful' representation of self in deliberations structured to be useful and relevant to 'real' geographically-located politics. It wants to foster an online public commons where participants are respectful of difference, civil in their exchanges, and focused on local issues. It wants to get away from the anarchic aspects of cyberspace in order to avoid transferring the 'often irrelevant and harsh style of global political newsgroups' into the commons (quoted from Minnesota E-Democracy Web page). These aims have been achieved to a considerable extent. Many of the problems encountered in Chapter Six have been either overcome or reduced in effect. High levels of reflexivity, respectful listening, and commitment to deliberations have been achieved. Deception of information and identity is almost non-existent and the domination of discourse by certain individuals is minimized. This has been accomplished in a number of ways: by the use of structured e-mail lists, the formalization of rules and guidelines, the careful management (rather than moderation) of the forums, the development of self-ownership and self-moderation, and the focus on issues within a defined political jurisdiction.

Some Internet-enthusiasts would criticize this structuring of discourse as undermining 'the natural potential' of cyberspace. Such structuring binds online discourse to material institutions, tying participants into the restrictions of offline identities. This criticism is in fact mistaken. It fails to recognize the way cyberspace has always-already been structured by the social context through which it has developed. The criticism also fails to appreciate that projects like Minnesota E-Democracy are themselves part of the evolutionary development of cyberspace, experimenting, developing, and refining the possibilities of online discourse. Behind the calls for allowing cyberspace to develop along an anarchic evolutionary path can be found discourses like libertarianism, discourses that promote and generalize their own particular notion of how cyber-culture should be. Cyber-interactions are, however, the result of a dynamic and complex interplay of social forces; they cannot easily be 'controlled' or 'contained.' Minnesota E-Democracy has to respond to an unfolding online drama. If it were to force interactions to take a particular direction, participants would resist or refuse by leaving. By encouraging participant ownership and self-management and by fostering the public dialogue that *already* takes place throughout cyberspace, the 'experiment' of 1994 has become a self-sustaining deliberative space where public opinion can form.

Minnesota E-Democracy has shown how cyber-deliberations can be enhanced to enable people to come to a greater understanding. On his last day participating in MPD, Robert Rafn (9/5/99) wrote,

> I've enjoyed reading the various debates and discussions on this list, and have especially appreciated hearing the views of those I disagree with: although I usually still end up disagreeing afterwards, at least it gives me a better understanding of different points of view that at first might seem completely incomprehensible to me.

While Minnesota E-Democracy has shown ways in which online deliberation can be enhanced, there are still many possibilities by which to more fully realize the public sphere conception. There is still room for greater reflexivity, respectful listening, and discursive equality. These limitations will only be overcome with the continued practice of deliberation. The project has shown how online public spheres are not only already with us in some sense, but also how they can be fostered to more fully develop rational public opinion. Towards the end of this chapter, I will explore ways in which the practice of deliberation can help overcome the most pressing problems facing Minnesota E-Democracy and similar deliberative fora. Before this, however, one further important question must be raised. We have seen how subjects develop into publicly-minded deliberators, but how does online public opinion feed into and so effect *formal* decision-making? I will approach this question by looking at another democracy online initiative – this time drawn from the British context. As well as indicating possible links between online fora and formal decision-making, my analysis of this initiative will lead to further consideration of the lack of inclusion (and participation generally) within online deliberative fora. It will also raise again the question of how to hold at bay the colonization of public discourse by the de-linguistified media of money and power.

7.3 Effecting Formal Publics: The Case of UKCOD

The central aim of Minnesota E-Democracy is to be involved in the formation of the strong citizens and public opinion that, in the deliberative model of democracy, need to be developed before formal decision making takes place. As Clift (1998c) puts it, dialogue within online democratic fora 'will influence government and the media, but more often they will influence the participants as citizens and effect how those citizens interact with the broader world.' The expectation is that such dialogue will lead to real political influence as public opinion develops and (eventually) bears down upon government.

On MN-POLITICS in 1997 the public financing of a proposed new sports stadium in Minneapolis came under increased fire as people discussed the issues online. This online debate helped raise political opposition to the stadium, particularly as it contributed to the development of an action group to lobby against the public funding of professional sports (Clift, 1997b; Clift, 1998b). The stadium proposal was defeated in the state legislature – the first time an effort supported by such influential backers had failed (Clift, 1998b). The online deliberations can also have an impact upon wider public opinion, the 'public agenda', and finally official decision making, because the space is 'watched' by the media, civic and political interest groups, state and local elected officials, politicians, campaign workers, and legislative staff (Clift, 1998a, Aikens, 1997:189-190).[37] Paralleling the effective combination of café discussion and print media in the development of the bourgeois public sphere, linking Minnesota E-Democracy's forums with the public at large through the mass media is seen as particularly important. While forum members bring issues in the media into the forum, the media also closely monitor the list, pulling out pieces for articles and looking for possible contacts for news items (Clift, 1997b). About once every couple of weeks there is something in the press from MN-POLITICS, especially in the case of the online events (Clift, 1998a). As the media watches the list, the list becomes an effective way for public opinion to feed into the larger public domain and influence the public agenda. For example, a discussion on MN-POLITICS in 1998 about a local squirrel problem was picked up by the media 'and more than half the quotes used in a ST Paul Pioneer Press article came from e-mail subscribers. Moreover, the city animal control division, a government institution, contacted the citizens. Not vice versa' (Lyttle, 1999). Thus, as Clift remarked (ibid), 'the online discussion and postings set the agenda that resulted in better government service.'

Unfortunately, the above examples of the direct impact of online discussions upon public opinion and government are at present few and far between. Although public opinion eventually influences decision making in some way, it is often difficult to clearly see how everyday postings on Minnesota E-Democracy impact upon Minnesota's legislation. Even though direct impact has not been the aim, the lack of clear signs of influence can be discouraging for forum participants and organizers. How can projects like Minnesota E-Democracy more fully facilitate the effective input of public opinion into formal publics? Clift (1998a) argues that the challenge is to try to encourage more public officials, official bodies, and civic organizations, to come onboard so that the discussions will influence

[37] One of the aims of the special events organized by Minnesota E-Democracy (like the E-Debate) is to provide a focus by which to draw media and public attention to the ongoing discussion lists (Clift, 1998b).

politics 'more directly.' Clift has been promoting a vision of developing more formal announcement and discussion spaces ('virtual committee rooms') to directly complement legislative and administrative decision-making structures.[38] The first practical realization of this vision was a 'virtual hearing' hosted by Minnesota E-Democracy in February 2000 in conjunction with official legislative activities discussing the question of representative reform in Minnesota.[39] The success of such efforts is yet to be seen. However, the possibility of linking online public deliberations with more formal decision making can be further evaluated by turning to the United Kingdom Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD) project.[40] UKCOD offers an exemplary case by which to explore the possibilities of a more direct link between formal publics and the deliberations of online publics.

UKCOD was established in 1996 as an independent, non-partisan, national, online democracy service.[41] The project's philosophy and aims are less precisely defined than are those of Minnesota E-Democracy.[42] However, two main aims are apparent, though emphasized to different degrees by different organizers. First, like Minnesota E-Democracy, the service wants to foster public dialogue for the development of online public opinion. Second, there is a desire to enhance citizen-representative communication and directly influence politicians. Given these aims, UKCOD offers a strong case by which to

[38] See Clift's vision at http://www.publicus.net/present/public/ (last accessed 25/01/00).

[39] See http://www.egroups.com/group/mn-vhroom/fullinfo.html (last accessed 25/01/00).

[40] UKCOD's home page is at http://freedom.democracy.org.uk/ (last accessed 31/03/99). At the time of writing the future of the project is in question and it is not accessible online.

[41] UKCOD is driven by a core team of 12 volunteers assisted by an advisory working group of some 200 individual supporters.

[42] My research of UKCOD is based upon observations of Web pages and archives, published research and discussion, and interviews with key organizers. Irving Rappaport is the founder and Chief Executive of UKCOD and responsible for overall project management. He has assisted my research of UKCOD through e-mail conversation and via an interview in London on 14 May 1998. Mannar Hussain is the Technical Manager of UKCOD, responsible for overseeing the technical development of the project. He has been very helpful with my e-mail inquiries and he gave time for an interview in London on 19 May 1998. Scott Aikens has had an advisory role on the project since its beginnings. As indicated earlier, I interviewed him in Cambridge on 28 May 1998. Dr Stephen Coleman is the Director of the Scholars Programme at the Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government. He is political adviser for UKCOD and has published some commentary on the unfolding experiment (see Coleman, 1999a, b, c). Although attempts to meet for an interview in London were hampered by the problems of meeting face-to-face, we have had some e-mail correspondence. Also useful for insight into the project organizers' visions and UKCOD's development are Thomas Gallagher's (1997) interviews with Rappaport, Coleman, Hussain, and Richard Stubbs (who has acted as UKCOD chair).

investigate the question of how online deliberations and public opinion can more directly be fed into and impact upon formal decision making.[43]

Like Minnesota E-Democracy, UKCOD offers an 'open group' where people can raise and discuss any topic related to politics in the United Kingdom. However, its main emphasis has been on running a number of online forums focused upon issues seen by organizers as highly relevant within British politics at the time. During the 1997 elections UKCOD offered forums on transport and the United Kingdom constitution. A special forum to promote the interest of first-time voters was also organized. Linked to each special issue is a 'resources section' designed to aid informed deliberations.[44]

UKCOD, again like Minnesota E-Democracy, has favoured the use of e-mail lists for its forums. The rules and guidelines for participation are also very similar to those of the Minnesota case. However, with UKCOD the Web is used more extensively to integrate the various forums and issues. All forums can be both read and posted to and from the project's Web page. The background information to each special issue is also available via the Website. The Web enables a formal, professional 'look' that is important in attracting the attention of official bodies and important political decision makers. The project has in fact been quite successful in linking up with official decision-making institutions. In November and December of 1996 the project teamed up with the UK Office of the European Parliament and the Scarman Trust to bring fourteen Members of the European Parliament and thirty one invited organizations together in an 'online seminar' debating the issue: 'Should Britain Join the EMU?' Citizens could follow the ongoing 'debate', and participate in a public forum on the issue. The emphasis of the project however was in facilitating the invited 'civic forum.'[45] In the run up to the 1997 general election a 'politicians forum' was offered alongside the

[43] Coleman (1999a) and Rappaport (1998) emphasise the experimental nature of UKCOD and encourage its analysis. Coleman (1999a:21) argues that '[t]he process of online information provision, deliberation and consultation will mature only when its procedural methodology has been subjected to reflection in the light of clearly stated democratic standards.' My evaluation of the project in the light of the public sphere conception aims to help this process. It would have been useful to undertake a more substantial evaluation of the actual online deliberations in terms of the Habermasian conception of communicative rationality. This then could be compared to the Minnesota E-Democracy case. However, the low quantity of deliberations in the public forums of UKCOD has not enabled a meaningful comparison.

[44] UKCOD political adviser Stephen Coleman has been responsible for much of the writing of background materials.

[45] A report on the Should Britain Join the EMU? forum is available at http://eto.org.uk/etd/policy/emurep1a.htm (last accessed 17/05/99).

public issues forums (the transport and UK constitution ones).[46] Much like Minnesota E-Democracy's E-debates, politicians representing various parties replied to questions UKCOD put to them on each of the special issues. After much hard work and publicity, including a project launch at the House of Commons on Feb 14th 1997, a high level of participation was gained from all the main political parties. In addition to the politicians forum, and as part of the First Time Voters initiative, UKCOD was able to get responses from the three main party leaders to three questions that were thought relevant to first time users.[47]

Bringing politicians online to answer questions is one way to link the informal public deliberations directly with formal decision-making bodies. Another way is by offering a medium by which to facilitate government consultative processes. The first project UKCOD ever undertook involved running an online budget consultation for the Brent Borough Council. Twelve percent of submissions were made via the Internet site. This was seen as quite a success, Rappaport (1998) points out, given that there were 80 thousand leaflets distributed physically through which citizens could make paper-based submissions. The Brent council followed this up with an online consultation on 'Local Agenda 21' (local government plan for sustainable development) and a further online budget consultation in 1998. UKCOD hosted online discussion forums for Brent citizens to discuss the consultation issues but there was little participation. Around Christmas 1996 UKCOD launched an initiative that allowed the public to discuss and make responses to a Government Green Paper on the electronic delivery of government services. UKCOD participants contributed 46 of the just under 300 responses made to the government. Experience with these consultative developments, and with organizing the public and politician forums, was drawn on to develop UKCOD's most ambitious and possibly most successful initiative, the Have Your Say Website.[48]

[46] Alex Balfour's successful but short-lived British General Election 97 site also attempted to structure deliberative forums in addition to providing extensive information on issues relating to UK politics. See http://www.ge97.co.uk/ (last accessed 20/05/99). As well as offering a number of its own forums, it linked into the UKCOD Transport forum. Alex Balfour is Content Director of UKCOD and was responsible for developing and producing the Have Your Say site discussed below.

[47] The questions were: why their party should be trusted to make a difference in general, what it would do for students and job trainees, and how they thought politics could be made exciting.

[48] See http://foi.democracy.org.uk (last accessed 17/05/99).

The Have Your Say Website and its associated e-mail lists ran from December 1997 to May 1998. The initiative linked into the consultation process of the new Labour Government's *Freedom of Information White Paper* which is focused upon increasing government transparency and is one aspect of a wider push to reform the British constitutional system. Electronic government (also a focus of one of UKCOD's special forums, as seen above) is another aspect of this reform.[49] In addition, the Blair Government has emphasized both the importance of reinvigorating civil society and of information technology. Given this context, it was not surprising that the Cabinet Office supported the UKCOD's idea of building a Website for public deliberation of the *Freedom of Information White Paper*. The Paper was posted on the Have Your Say Website with additional information to help explain its implications. Like all other UKCOD initiatives, a Web- and e-mail-based forum was provided for public discussion. The project's core element, agreed to by the Cabinet Office, was to enable direct communication between site participants and the British Government. This was achieved in two ways. First, Dr David Clark, the Minister for Public Service and in charge of the White Paper, agreed to respond to site users' questions that they e-mailed to the service. All questions were responded to at length by the Minister and placed on the site. Most questions were well developed and the responses from the Minister were impressive in their length and detail.[50] Second, a space was provided where people could make electronic submissions on the White Paper. All electronic submissions, plus those submitted in conventional paper form were made available for public viewing on the site.[51] The process turned out to be very successful. Over half of the total submissions to government were made through the site (Coleman, 1999c).

While UKCOD's principle of political independence and neutrality remained 'non-negotiable' (Coleman, 1999c), the project became a legitimate and important part of the British Government's consultation process. The Have Your Say initiative can be seen as a major step forward in expanding and opening up the Government's consultation process for a number of reasons. Never before had electronic submissions been accepted as part of

[49] Electronic Government is normally concerned with increasing the efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and democratic accountability of government. For a review of the UK Government initiatives see the report of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (1998). Coleman (1999a:17-18) sees the UK Government's information and communications technology initiatives as motivated by interest in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of government administration and services rather than by the prospect of new information and communications technologies enhancing democratic governance.

[50] The public nature of the Have Your Say citizen-government exchanges possibly encouraged more attention to questions and responses than is the case with ordinary letter-based communication.

[51] See http://foi.democracy.org.uk/html/submissions_index.html (last accessed 17/05/99).

government policy making. It was also the first time a British Government Minister had agreed to take part in answering questions regarding a specific policy online. Furthermore, it was the first time that submissions of any type (whether paper or electronic) had been published online. In fact, submissions to a proposed piece of legislation had never (in the United Kingdom at least) been made so publicly available during any consultation process. On these terms, the 'experiment' can be celebrated by all democracy advocates as offering a way towards greater efficiency and transparency of government. The future of similar efforts in the United Kingdom looks bright given the Blair Government's blessing of UKCOD, its enthusiasm for expanding civil society, and its embrace of new information and communications technologies generally. As Prime Minister Tony Blair declared,

> The 'Have Your Say' website is a historic opportunity for the public to play a meaningful part in the framing of new legislation by using the Internet to lobby and question a Government minister. I support this initiative to help modernise and enhance British democracy and open up Government and I hope similar consultations will be set up in future as part of the legislative process. (quoted from UKCOD homepage)

Through the Have Your Say initiative, Coleman (1999b) argues, 'UKCOD had created a constitutional innovation which, if Blair's hope is realized, will serve as a precedent for the future of democratic governance.' However, the initiative was not wholly successful as it failed to achieve an adequate level of informal public deliberation. Richard Stubbs, previous chair of UKCOD, had surmised before the official launch of the project, 'I suppose if the Freedom of Information consultation went ahead and we only had 60 or 70 people discussing on site then that would be a complete failure' (quoted in Gallagher, 1997:18). Unfortunately, participation in deliberations did turn out to be extremely low. A mere thirty three people participated in the online forum that accompanied the consultation. The 120 messages posted included posts from UKCOD's own board and David Clark's replies to the 29 e-mail questions he was posed. While Hussain (1998) acknowledged the disappointing levels of public deliberation, other organizers avoided the issue, highlighting instead the successful consultation process that had taken place.[52] In fact, participation rates in all UKCOD's forums have been disappointing in comparison with its successful consultations.[53]

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[52] See, for example, Rappaport (1998) and Coleman (1999a, 1999c).

[53] In the online forum for The Future of the UK Constitution initiative, 72 authors posted 515 messages over the 20 months between 17 February 1999 and 15 October 1998. This is a fairly ordinary participation rate when compared to MN-POLITICS. It looks even more ordinary when we

Paradoxically, UKCOD's efforts to directly link citizens with their representative decision-making bodies may be largely responsible for the poor level of public deliberations, with the consultation work inadvertently drawing participation away from the informal discursive forums. Given the choice between the quick and easy expression of individual views and the unfamiliar, time consuming, and not immediately rewarding task of deliberation, it is not surprising that participants nurtured within liberal individualist cultures will be inclined towards the more direct option. Citizens take the opportunity to submit their individual views, bypassing deliberation for official consultation. In fact, UKCOD has actually steered participants towards the direct expression of their interests (the consultation aspect) and away from informal public discourse by structuring its projects in a top-down, formalized manner with a pseudo-official status.

Aikens (1998b) argues that UKCOD's low participation rate in comparison with Minnesota E-Democracy is partly a result of the British being more reluctant to participate in deliberation than American citizens. We must also not that Minnesota has a highly active civic culture in comparison to other US states (Clift, 1998b).[54] Yet, as Hussain (1998) notes, the very active UK.politics Usenet groups show that there is ample demand in the United Kingdom for 'expressive' online deliberations.[55] Low participation on UKCOD's forums is not so much due to a lack of deliberative will within the population at large as to UKCOD's top-down, formalized structuring of participation and the pseudo-official status of its proceedings. This is illustrated by comparing UKCOD's forums with both those of Minnesota E-Democracy and Usenet. A key factor is the level of self-management. Participants in Usenet groups, relative to UKCOD, have much more freedom and responsibility in the determination of the agenda, choice of supporting information, the mores of participation, the solving of group problems, and so on. This high level of forum self-management demands participant involvement and builds a self-sustaining discourse.

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consider the fact that 5 authors made up 54% (274) of messages. Other forums associated with special issues were even less frequented. The Britain and the European Monetary Union forum attracted 56 messages and 29 authors, while the First Time Voters forum attracted 114 messages and 27 authors.

[54] Minnesota's active civic culture includes a strong tradition of public broadcasting, a high voting rate relative to other parts of the United States, and amongst the highest number of civic organizations per capita (Clift, 1998b).

[55] The high levels of activity on UK.politics Usenet groups also show that national-level deliberations can work, despite the emphasis that Aikens (1998b) and others place on the local nature of successful projects like Minnesota E-Democracy. The local nature of the Minnesota project, however, tends to favour the person-to-person recruiting that both projects have carried out to gain subscribers.

UKCOD does have its open forum which is offered as a space where participants can determine the agenda within the bounds of 'UK politics.' Moreover, self-management is encouraged to some degree within the discussion forums. But overall UKCOD is hierarchically structured, as is shown by its pre-determined special issue initiatives. This structuring restricts the freedom and responsibility of participants. Some degree of structuring *is* necessary to enhance deliberation in cyberspace, as is demonstrated by the limitations, pointed to in Chapter Six, associated with more anarchic cyber-forums such as Usenet. By structuring discourse, UKCOD hopes to build a space that overcomes these limitations (Hussain, 1998). Yet there is no reason, as Hussain (1998) points out, why more civil deliberations cannot be developed in parallel with the facilitation of greater forum self-ownership. Minnesota E-Democracy shows that this can be done. While it has a list of rules, list managers, and organized special events, it has also emphasized participant self-management and agenda-setting within its forums. Rather than determining discussion topics and providing the related information, as UKCOD does, Minnesota E-Democracy relies upon participants' own interests and knowledge (although it does provide some links to Websites where relevant information sources may be found). Aikens (1998b) believes that Minnesota E-Democracy's greater success in achieving a self-perpetuating citizen dialogue is indeed partly due to encouraging participant ownership and control of deliberations. Gallagher (1997:5) summarizes Aikens views on this in terms of UKCOD's lack of participation. Aikens

> thought that the content of the UKCOD site was far too dependent on top-down decision-making when it ought, in the first instance, to be a product of the community of users. The process of coming to a topic of importance might actually be more important than the results of the debate on that topic. Having decisions made for you could be a disincentive for potentially active participants.

As well as its top-down organizational style, UKCOD steers participation from informal to formal deliberations through the pseudo-official status of its consultation processes. UKCOD has striven to be recognized as a legitimate body of the official democratic process. As Hussain (1998) recounts, 'our aim has always been to get up an official or pseudo-official project.' It has done this by lobbying politicians and important political groups, linking up with influential academic groups and NGOs (for example, the Hansard society), arranging parliamentary launches of its projects, and gaining approval from governmental representatives and bodies (for example, the Cabinet Office and the Office of the European

Parliament).[56] This drive to be officially recognized by the most powerful political forces in the land is highlighted on UKCOD's homepage, where a picture of the Prime Minister at a computer visiting the online site is prominently positioned along with his enthusiastic endorsement (see the above quote). While steadfastly maintaining its formal independence, a 'pseudo-official' status has now been attained (Hussain, 1998). Building such official recognition offers greater voice to those who participate, motivating individuals and groups to take part in the consultative processes offered. However, this unfortunately also tends to sideline the informal deliberations offered by UKCOD.

For deliberative democracy, the formation of public opinion through informal rational-critical argumentation must come before or at least proceed independently of formal decision making. UKCOD's consultation work has successfully demonstrated ways in which the Internet can be utilized to extend citizen-to-representative interaction. However, the promotion of public consultations combined with a top-down structure and pseudo-official status has steered participation away from the spaces UKCOD has provided for informal public argumentation. Given its failure to stimulate discourse on its site, UKCOD's consultations must rely upon rational public opinion developed elsewhere. The risk, of course, is that UKCOD will simply become another medium by which a few privileged individuals and groups promote their interests without having to partake in informal deliberation with those with conflicting views. Furthermore, UKCOD must be careful that its increasing legitimation as an official consultative mechanism does not lead to it becoming simply another tool for administrative power and that its provision of a safe environment for government officials and politicians to present themselves before the online audience does not slip into facilitating representative publicity rather than opening up official decision making to public scrutiny.[57]

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[56] UKCOD's efforts to get civil servants to participate is highlighted by its decision to drop the rule against anonymous contributions (when the Have Your Say initiative got under way), primarily in order 'to encourage civil servants to participate, and the one reason civil servants don't participate in this country is because they don't want to be named' (Rappaport, 1998).

[57] From my interviews with organizers, it seems that there have always been differing visions of how UKCOD could make a contribution to the public sphere. Gallagher's (1997:6) interviews with project organizers confirm a conflict between 'the citizen vs institution-based model . . . . Should the purpose of UKCOD be to achieve discursive, deliberative democracy or is it rather to install alternative decision-making procedures which would operate alongside existing parliamentary institutions?' While Aikens has pushed for a more discursive model, others within UKCOD's organization have been interested in developing the project as a place where participatory decision making can occur (Gallagher, 1997:5-6). Suggestions have included using the technology for voting, opinion gauging, and policy formation. Hussain (1998), for instance, is interested in developing a system like a citizens' jury. The closest that UKCOD has come to this was talk of trying to devise a method of gauging the opinion of members of the public forum in order to develop the questions to be put to the politicians in the politician's forum that was held in the lead-up to the 1997 general election. An

UKCOD's experience reinforces the need for deliberative democracy projects to start with the development of rational-critical discourse that is autonomous from formal decision making. Such deliberations *can* be fostered online, as demonstrated by Minnesota E-Democracy. The public opinion formed online will *eventually* filter into the complex networks of the public sphere and thereby bear upon formal political processes. Minnesota E-Democracy has developed ways to strengthen the loose links between online publics, the larger public sphere, and formal publics (for instance, by encouraging media and decision makers to watch the forums, and by developing social action groups). More structured efforts to make decision makers more attentive to public opinion, such as those being experimented with by both Minnesota E-Democracy and UKCOD (online consultations, E-Debates, virtual committee rooms), may also prove useful for increasing the impact of online discourse upon policy development.

However, getting people involved in such online deliberation may be difficult given Internet access restrictions and the myriad of commercial and non-commercial forms of interaction vying for the attention of the cyber-participant. Furthermore, the expansion online of direct forms of participation may increasingly capture the interest of those who are expressly interested in politics. I have shown that online deliberation can be structured to approximate public sphere discourse. I now need to show that online deliberation can become a reality for the general public and not simply for a small group of cyber-democracy enthusiasts.

7.4 The Marginalization and Incorporation of Online Deliberative Forums

How extensive and representative is online deliberation? Perhaps the two cases considered above are and will remain marginal as far as their respective general populations are concerned? We have already seen a number of significant factors that limit cyber-participation. Chapter Five pointed to Internet access restrictions and the increasing domination of cyber-interactions by commerce. Chapter Six showed how many non-commercial and non-government online interactive spaces act as virtual communities of common interest and values rather than as rational-critical deliberative forums. In this chapter I have shown how the option of individualized political participation offered by

invitation to those online to submit ideas was made, but in the end Coleman wrote the questions based on what he believed would be publicly interesting in terms of each particular issue (Rappaport, 1998). These decision-making notions draw upon a mixture of deliberative and liberal individualist visions, the latter coming to the fore in models promoting individual expression and aggregative methods of calculating public opinion.

UKCOD proved more attractive than its deliberative forums. Finally, while Minnesota E-Democracy has had success in attracting subscribers, this participation has been non-representative of the larger population. How then can deliberative forums attract widespread and representative participation?

In order to answer this question, I firstly provide a brief overview of online deliberative initiatives. I then look at the growth of liberal individualist initiatives online and question whether such developments, along with commerce and virtual communities, marginalize cyber-deliberation. Further, I consider whether those who do participate within online deliberative fora are in fact not representative of the wider public, as is the case with Minnesota E-Democracy's lists. Finally, I consider the socio-cultural factors that structure online political participation and suggest how this participation may be further expanded and an inclusive public sphere developed.

7.4.1 The Development of Online Deliberative Initiatives

At present, there is a considerable amount of online deliberation feeding into the everyday networks of public deliberation offline. As shown in Chapter Six, there are the many spaces of informal deliberation on Usenet groups, e-mail lists, and Web forums. There are also many explicitly organized online efforts that attempt to expand these informal deliberations. Projects like Minnesota E-Democracy are growing steadily. As noted earlier, the original MN-POLITICS forum that began in 1994 has been replicated by Minnesota E-Democracy 'issues' forums. The Minnesota model has now been exported to other states of the USA, as in the case of the Iowa E-Democracy project, and to other nations, influencing, for example, UKCOD and the Nova Scotia Electronic Democracy Forum.[58] This last discussion list, explicitly modelled upon MN-POLITICS and copying its rules, began in 1998 and sought to deliberate upon issues stimulated by elections in Nova Scotia, Canada (Clift, 1998).[59]

[58] For the Iowa E-Democracy project, see http://www.e-democracy.org/ia/ (last accessed 7/7/00)

[59] See http://ccen.ussb.ns.ca/edemoc (offline as at 7/7/00). Minnesota E-Democracy also inspired, reports Thompson and Aikens (1998), the British centre-left online public policy 'think tank' Nexus, http://www.netnexus.org/index.htm (last accessed 20/11/99). Steven Clift actively promotes the Minnesota model and has written a number of resources to help others set up their own forums. These resources can be found on the Minnesota E-Democracy Website and on Clift's personal homepage at http://www.publicus.net/ (last accessed 14/7/00).

Other online deliberative democracy projects are developing somewhat independently of Minnesota E-Democracy.[60] One very promising effort, still in its early stages of construction, is the CivicExchange: Strong Democracy in Cyberspace project, driven by Benjamin Barber's Walt Whitman Center for Culture and democracy at Rutgers University and the Information Society Project at Yale Law School. The project is being designed with the belief that 'cyberspace is the new public space of the next century.' It 'aims to build a deliberative web site that will facilitate lively and self-governing political discourse . . . [that] assure[s] ongoing deliberative, thoughtful dialogue where citizens can think and rethink issues, confront new ideas and people, and change their minds in the course of the discussion' (cited from CivicExchange home page).[61] In addition to such projects, deliberative forums can often be found as a central aspect of many community networks and in a number of CityNet projects such as Santa Monica's PEN, Amsterdam's Digital City, and the IperBolE project of Bologna (see Tsagarousianou et al., 1998). Online deliberative fora are not confined to the context of Western democracies. An example of a deliberative project focusing on a less than democratic non-Western political scene is Malaysia.Net.[62] This forum illustrates the significance for real politics of online discourse. Clift (1998c) describes the list and its impact:

> Hosted by an ISP owned by a Malaysian national in Sydney, Australia, it [Malaysia.Net] illustrates the power of an open forum in an environment with a culturally restrained media. A well-respected journalist—in the same generation as the leaders of the country and who is no longer published in print in Malaysia or Singapore—writes news stories for over 800 subscribers. They become talking points on the list. Indicating that the posting circulates widely in the government, Malaysia.Net has received messages containing clarifications from high-level officials. With an estimated 90 percent of subscribers in Malaysia, the fact that the servers are in Australia points to the complex cross-border impacts of the Internet.

[60] There are also online deliberative projects that concentrate specifically upon the question of the development of Internet-democracy. Of particular note are John Gøtze and Michael MacPherson's Democr@cy Forum http://www.democracyforum.net/ (last accessed 14/7/00) and the European Commission Information Society Project Office's discussion list el-democracy at http://www.ispo.cec.be/ispo/elecdemodl.html (last accessed 14/7/00).

[61] See http://webserver.law.yale.edu/infosociety/civicexhange.html (last accessed 20/1/00).

[62] See http://www.malaysia.net/ (last accessed 20/11/99).

As well as these organized fora, there are thousands of activist groups utilizing the Internet to draw public attention to particular issues and to spark deliberation at local, national, and global levels.[63] A recent example was the public deliberation stimulated (online and offline) by civic group protests (online and offline) focused upon the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in November 1999.[64] Another, near legendary, example is the Zapatista movement, which not only used the Internet to mobilize support for their resistance against the oppression of poor Mayan farmers by Chiapas landowners and the Mexican Government, but also employed the Internet to help the movement include the whole community in its decision making. These civic activist groups often attract individuals who share a similar concern while their online presence tends to focus upon organizational issues and direct political action rather than deliberation. Yet, their activities feed into and are very important for stimulating broader public debate. As such, they are an important element of argumentation in the complex networks of the contemporary public sphere.

These examples confirm that, as well as the relatively 'disorganized' deliberative culture of cyberspace outlined in Chapter Six, there are many active deliberative projects online. However, in this thesis I have identified a number of factors that are significantly limiting participation in online deliberation. There are the limitations of Internet access, the colonization of online spaces by commercialism, the attraction of communitarian forms of participation, and the lack of representativeness noted within Minnesota E-Democracy. I have also indicated how the liberal individualist options offered by UKCOD seem to draw interest away from deliberation. I now want to look further at the liberal individualist online initiatives, for these are rapidly expanding and pose the most direct competition to deliberative fora because they target the most politically active online participants. I have already discussed some liberal individualist government initiatives in chapters one and five. Here, I will overview non-government initiatives. This overview will provide an indication of the extent of the competition to deliberative democracy that is emerging online.

7.4.2 The Expansion of Liberal Individualist Initiatives

As argued above, UKCOD's increasing focus upon facilitating citizen-government interaction may mean that the initiative merely ends up extending existing individualized

[63] A multitude of civil action groups make use of the Internet, from high profile global organizations such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace to local issue groups. An interesting example is the Digital Freedom Network which 'publicizes the banned writings of political dissidents by making them available via the Internet' (Doheny-Farina, 1996:75). For more examples of this form of Internet facilitated publicity, see Kellner (1999).

[64] See Seattle independent media at http://www.infosubway.org/infosubway (last accessed 5/5/00).

democratic practices, facilitating representative publicity, and supporting administrative power. There are an increasing number of online projects that go further in this direction, offering the means for citizens to directly access and choose between an array of options publicized through the Internet by politicians and decision makers. The US-based Democracy Network (DNet) is one such example.

DNet, an initiative of the US non-profit public policy organization The Center for Governmental Studies, was initially conceived as an interactive cable television video voters guide, but shifted to the Internet in 1996 (Doctor and Dutton, 1999).[65] DNet has rapidly expanded its coverage of US election-oriented politics, from local coverage of the 1996 elections in the city of Santa Monica, California, to coverage of local, state, and national candidates throughout the United States in the 2000 general elections. Although there is some provision for participant interaction, DNet's aim is to improve democracy, primarily via providing improved information about candidates' positions on election issues.[66] As well as providing media reports and other secondary sources, DNet encourages candidates to directly provide issue statements, biographical data, and endorsements (ibid:226). This direct access to politicians' views is supported by a facility for citizen-to-candidate communication: candidate e-mail contacts are provided and there are occasional live interviews where users can communicate directly with candidates or with experts (ibid:228).

By way of these many information sources, the project aims to help voters make more reasonable choices. As Docter and Dutton (1999:226) note, DNet believes in the conception of a rational voter. In other words, it assumes the liberal individualist subject who only needs to be given the appropriate information in order to make the right choices for themselves. This approach, then, departs from the deliberative conception where strong citizens are developed through an extended intersubjective process. DNet promotes a consumer choice model of politics in which the full array of competing positions are displayed for individuals to choose from. It thus extends the existing top-down, consumer-oriented representative system of US democracy. Rather than building a sovereign deliberative public, DNet provides a space for representative publicity that sidesteps critical debate. The aim of providing more substantive information is indeed an important aspect of enhancing democratic discussion. But, most importantly, we need spaces for deliberation

[65] See DNet at http://www.democracynet.org/ (last accessed 1/6/00). The Center for Governmental Studies, whose aim is to improve the processes of media and governance, can be found at http://www.cgs.org (last accessed 20/11/99).

[66] Chat and bulletin boards are available but have not been emphasised nor well attended.

and this is not valued by DNet which measures success merely by the number of 'hits' on its Website, and not by the deliberative activity it facilitates. Without mentioning online deliberations, DNet's 1998 report states that it 'garnered 5.5 million hits in the general election cycle – over 1,000,000 hits just in the 48 hours preceding the election. Over 225,000 pages of information were displayed' (Taylor, 1998).

DNet is part of the ongoing expansion of liberal individualist political projects online. There are many other examples. For instance, the libertarian-oriented (with Newt Gringrich on board) non-profit Web-based Project Vote Smart has provided extensive information on US congressional candidates since 1994.[67] The California Online Voter Guide pulls together election-oriented information and resources offered on the Internet to help voters make informed decisions about the many choices available.[68] Within the guide, voters can find hundreds of links to official campaign Websites, phone numbers for campaign offices, and campaign contribution information to help voters follow the money. An example outside the United States is Electronic Democracy – New Zealand!, which concentrates upon making government and political information available online. Although it now offers a discussion forum, this has not to date attracted any participation.[69] There are also private companies such as Politics.com trying to make profits out of the possible demand for political information through the Internet.[70] Politics.com was launched in October 1999 with the express goal of becoming 'the place where politics happens on the Internet.' It argues that it is the best resource for following, understanding, and enjoying the race for the Presidency in 2000 and beyond. Politics.com hopes to be enhanced by personalized news, state-level information, discussion boards, and an improved directory of political sites. Another example of a private, individualized venture is Vote.com, which offers users the chance to vote on a topic listed on the site.[71] Votes are then sent to congressional representatives, Senators, and the President and subsequently users are sent reports on how their representatives voted on each issue.[72] Finally, there are, of course, thousands of partisan

[67] http://vote-smart.org/ (last accessed 1/6/00).

[68] See www.calvoter.org (last accessed 1/6/00).

[69] http://www.naturespace.co.nz/ed/index.htm (last accessed 1/6/00).

[70] See http://www.Politics.com (last accessed 1/6/00).

[71] See http://www.vote.com/ (last accessed 1/06/00).

[72] Other private politics online ventures include speakout.com, e-thepeople.com, and voxcap.com (all accessed 5/5/00).

Websites promoting parties and pressure groups that reinforce the liberal individualist model.

Much explicit political participation online is now liberal individualist in orientation. Bimber's research (1998) shows that online activity by the most politically mobilized is dominated not by deliberation but by browsing for information supplied by well resourced interest groups competing for attention through cyberspace. As demonstrated by the UKCOD experience, given the option between deliberative and individualist forms of participation, most politically active individuals choose the latter. This demand for individualized systems is being met and encouraged by government online efforts, commercial political ventures, and (as seen above) cyber-democracy projects, all of which offer various combinations of online information, direct mailing systems, instant voting, and online polling.

This expansion of liberal individualist cyber-politics threatens to marginalize or incorporate online deliberative spaces. As outlined in Chapter Six, those who resist the individualist option, and can also pull themselves away from virtual consumerism and entertainment, often turn to online groups of common interest and support rather than to spaces of rational-critical debate. Despite such trends, however, there is still much participation taking place within online deliberative forums. Who then is being attracted to these deliberations?

7.4.3 Online Deliberation as Elitist Practice

At present there are many very active fora of public discourse online. The Pew Research Center (1999) reports that 11% of US Internet users have engaged in online discussion about politics. However, such political engagement is under increasing competition from non-deliberative forms of online participation. Moreover, as demonstrated by Minnesota E-Democracy, online deliberative fora also face the problem of how to achieve a participation profile that is broadly representative of the general population. Not only does access to the Internet remain a major limitation, but those who participate in cyber-deliberations generally represent a narrow set of those already online.

Although access to the Internet is rapidly increasing in Western democracies, those who are politically active tend to be those who have been online the longest and who are already politically active offline (Bimber, 1998; The Pew Research Center, 1999).[73] Furthermore, as

[73] Garramone et al. (1986) predict from their research that those who are more likely to use computer-mediated political communication systems are also likely to be involved in traditional political

indicated by the subscriber demographics of Minnesota E-Democracy, those participating tend to be educated, wealthy, males (Bonchek, 1997; The Pew Research Center, 1999; Bimber, 1999). A stratification is growing between an active political elite and the rest of the online population. Calabrese and Borchert (1996) predict the form of this emerging stratification in some detail. They argue that two models of online activity, civic and consumer, are developing and that these overlap with offline socio-economic status.

> The civic model will primarily occupy a stratum of the population constituted by significant portions of the new class of technical and professional intelligentsia. While the spending power of the new class as a whole makes its members prime targets within the consumer model, a portion of the new class – the portion which constitutes much of the "attentive public", that is, the audience for, and sometimes members of, policy elites – will engage proportionately more frequently in political deliberations than will members of lower strata. . . . For the new class, electronic democracy will facilitate and confirm its members' political franchise and their authentic access to the closest contemporary approximation of the early bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas (1989) and others.

Calabrese and Borchert thus predict a stratification in which an 'upper strata' of the online population will generally be effective in utilizing the new media to enhance their political (and economic) prospects, while a 'lower strata', overlapping with those of lower socio-economic status and forming the majority of those online, will primarily participate in hierarchically structured and commercially-controlled systems of interaction – online shopping, private interaction (including virtual communities) and entertainment. Political participation in this lower strata will be confined to representative publicity and direct voting. A similar pattern of stratification has been observed by other researchers (see Jordan 1999; Hill and Hughes, 1998). The inevitability of this stratification seems to have been accepted by UKCOD, amongst other online democracy projects. As noted by UKCOD's political adviser Stephen Coleman in an interview with Gallagher (1997:6), there has been an aim all along 'to reach attentive political spectators, those who watch Channel Four news and/or read broadsheet newspapers.'

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activities. Katz (1997b), reporting research of 1444 US citizens commissioned by Wired magazine and the Merrill Lynch Forum, argues that the 'highly connected' tend to be more politically active in offline politics, in comparison to the 'non-wired' or 'less connected.' Aikens (1997:87) found that, in contrast to the general population, practically all sampled participants on MN-Politics were voters.

Online political sites, including deliberative projects, are reinforcing the privilege of a political and economic elite, providing them with an efficient tool to make their voices heard. This is of course antithetical to the public sphere requirement of full inclusion and equality. If the Internet is to enhance the public sphere, we must look at how participation in spaces of rational-critical deliberation can be fostered, not only to increase the overall number of people involved but also to maximize inclusion of those affected by the questions under discussion.

7.4.4 Resisting System Colonization and Increasing Deliberative Participation

Although deliberative efforts do exist and are facilitating communicative rationality, they are increasingly threatened by marginalization and incorporation by liberal individualist initiatives, communitarian groups, and commercial sites. In addition, those who do participate tend to be those who are most active and powerful in offline politics. Both the threat to deliberative culture and stratification of participation can be traced back to the systemic constraints considered in Chapter Five. Stratifications within cyber-participation result from socio-cultural differences that are directly influenced by the system's media of money and administrative power. Likewise, consumerism and privatized-individualized forms of politics suggest an incursion of instrumental-strategic reason into cyberspace, indicating cyberspace's lack of autonomy from system's media.

As is the case in the wider political culture, online deliberation is being retarded by the media of money and power. In order to overcome the stratification of participation and increase its deliberative character, the system's colonization of public cyberspaces must be resisted. How is this to be done? As indicated in Chapter Two, Habermas' response is that resistance to such colonization can be effected by increasing public participation in deliberation. Though this solution seems somewhat circular, it could succeed given that there is already a 'germ' of deliberative practice from which to foster its further development. To guide this development, we can once more look to the experiences of online deliberative spaces and projects that, together with the complex web of offline deliberative spaces, already exist despite the spread of liberal individualist politics, consumerism, and virtual communities.

From the experiences of the projects considered above, particularly Minnesota E-Democracy, we can find ways to encourage greater participation within online deliberative spaces. To begin, it is important to develop a safe environment that maintains respectful and sincere deliberations. This is an ongoing task. Initiatives like Minnesota E-Democracy find it difficult to attract women and members of marginalized groups. They need to continue to

work on developing respectful listening to accommodate more diverse styles of speaking. I have also pointed to the importance of making forums meaningful to participants by linking the issues discussed to everyday lived reality, and in particular to a political jurisdiction. This can be done by keeping deliberations focused upon issues pertinent to those bound by a particular offline political jurisdiction and by bringing decision makers, the media, and interest groups into the forums. These groups can be attracted through specially organized events, like virtual debates and virtual committee rooms, or simply by making the online public debate widely known. As Clift often points out, when a few dozen citizens get together in any public space, interest from politicians and the media soon follows.

However, as can be seen from the lack of participation in many well organized offline deliberative fora, quality debate and a focus on everyday lived reality does not automatically attract a large and representative public. From his experience with Minnesota E-Democracy, Steven Clift agrees that getting people into forums is one of the biggest problems facing deliberative projects. He argues that what is required is an active recruitment drive in which people are signed up one at a time. Clift also believes that the type of technology used is important. E-mail lists are more useful for 'capturing' the audience than either Websites or Usenet groups. As argued above, not only is e-mail the most popular and 'user friendly' online tool, but e-mail lists offer a push technology so that one only needs to 'make the sell' once (Clift, 1997b). E-mail lists ensure that messages are automatically distributed to all subscribers – people do not need to make the effort to go to the forum each time they go online, as is required with the Web and Usenet groups. There are still problems with e-mail lists (particularly the difficulty of locating them online), problems which are complicated by the different software and standards employed. These problems may be overcome if support is raised for initiatives like Clift's Open Groups which aims to develop a set of 'open standards' by which online interactive hosts can describe their forums in order to help 'people search, locate, evaluate, and join ongoing interactive public groups across the Internet.'[74]

Not everyone, of course, needs to take part in online deliberations in order for Internet discourse to enhance the public sphere in general. Online public opinion can be extended by the development of links with the complex networks of public debate that exist in modern society. As well as through the multitude of interactions individuals have with each other in everyday life, such links can be forged through the mass media (as Minnesota E-Democracy

[74] See http://www.opengroups.org (last accessed 5/4/00).

is doing). These mass media-Internet linkages may in the near future be aided by technological developments in which the boundaries between the mass media and the Internet are increasingly blurred. Furthermore, CMC developments promise cheaper and more user-friendly forms of online deliberation. For instance, orally-based technologies – talking computers and digital television – could reduce the need for the literarcy skills presently required for online deliberation. We must not, however, assume that this technological potential will automatically transpire. It will need to be appropriately developed. For this to happen, the resourcing of online deliberative 'experiments' is critical. Without urgent funding, projects like Minnesota E-Democracy will either fold or become completely sidelined as democracy online becomes increasingly based upon pre-Internet, non-deliberative forms of politics. The resourcing and development of deliberative initiatives will help to realize the potential of the present Internet for significantly extending the public sphere.

7.5 Conclusion

In Chapter Five I showed how the private economy and administrative state limit the autonomy and inclusivity of the public sphere. In Chapter Six I pointed to a number of further restrictions that prevent public online discourse from approximating the deliberative conception. These limitations include a lack of reflexivity; a lack of respectful listening and commitment to working with difference, leading to the fragmentation of cyberspace into interest groups; the difficulty of verifying identity claims and information put forward in discourse; and the domination of discourse by certain individuals and groups. However, I have argued in this chapter, in particular by way of a case study of Minnesota E-Democracy, that there are a number of means by which to overcome these discursive limitations and to structure deliberations more in line with the public sphere conception. These means include the use of structured e-mail lists, the formalization of rules and guidelines, the careful management of forums, the encouragement of self-ownership and self-moderation, and a focus on offline political issues. By these means, Minnesota E-Democracy has built self-sustaining deliberative forums that foster the critical public dialogue already evident to some degree in various places in cyberspace. Despite the claims of Poster and other critics, it is clear that online public spheres are not only already with us to a significant degree, but that they can be readily expanded. There are still areas that need to be worked upon, including increasing reflexivity, respectful listening, discursive equality, and, most significantly, expanding the representativeness of the forums in relation to the larger population.

A further ongoing problem for Minnesota E-Democracy is how to link online deliberations with the larger (offline) public sphere and formal decision making. The experiences of UKCOD indicate the difficulties to be faced in solving this problem. UKCOD's over-emphasis upon official consultation risks promoting a liberal individualist form of politics, facilitating representative publicity, and allowing co-option by administrative power. Rather than facilitating the individual expression of interests, the first priority of any deliberative project must be the development of public opinion. Once developed, online public opinion can be linked into and strengthen the deliberative opinions forming within the complex networks of the public sphere, before bearing down upon the formal decision making of democratic politics.

There are many informal, dialogic cyber-forums approximating rational discourse and a growing number of online deliberative experiments. However, participation in these deliberative forums is under increasing competition from online consumerism, virtual communities of common interest and shared values, and liberal individualist forms of participation dominating online political projects. Furthermore, a lack of representation in many deliberative online spaces, reflecting the stratification of political participation offline, militates against the democratic legitimacy of the public opinion formed.

Attracting participants into deliberative forums will be difficult given the aforementioned personalized options available to participants online. The situation reflects the larger individualized and privatized socio-cultural context within which the Internet is situated. As Barber (1998b:261-262) notes, new technologies largely reflect and augment current socioeconomic institutions and political attitudes: 'A commercial culture will entail a commercialized technology. A society dominated by the ideology of privatization will engender a privatized internet.' The Internet certainly has democratic potential but 'it will take political will to allow such tendencies to emerge and modify traditional attitudes and institutions, which in the meantime are likely to be determinative.' Developing a deliberative public within the context of a system that encourages consumerism, privatized interaction, and individualized politics will be difficult. But the task is not impossible. Online and offline deliberative forums already exist. We can work from these forums to extend deliberation online and to increase its linkages with offline publics, and hence to expand the public sphere at large. Success stories from various contexts around the globe, from Minnesota E-Democracy to Malaysia.net, show that this is indeed possible.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 Thesis Problem and Strategy: Habermas and the Public Sphere Applied to Cyberspace

The arrival of new digital based communications technologies in the late twentieth century has revitalized long-running debates about the political significance of the media. Central to these debates has been the development and increasing influence of the Internet, the global system of computer networks that has rapidly spread from scientific research institutions into government, businesses, schools, and households, and promises to become part of nearly every aspect of twenty-first century life for the 'wired consumer.' In terms of its political role, the Internet has been widely celebrated as providing the means for non-hierarchical, two-way citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-government communications that can revolutionize present democratic systems. Some commentators have gone as far as to say that the information sharing and dialogue facilitated by the Internet can foster sovereign deliberative publics, moving us closer to the democratic promise of the Greek agora, New England town hall meetings, and eighteenth-century Parisian café culture (Rheingold, 1993; Gore 1994). However, there are also those who see the expanding network of computer networks as a vehicle for the spread of commercialism, individualism, social inequalities, and a 'cacophony of noise' or a 'dense thicket of trivia' (Roszak, 1994; Stoll, 1995). This thesis has investigated these claims and concerns about the impact of the Internet upon democracy. Specifically, it has questioned whether the Internet can enhance the public sphere, the sphere of rational-critical citizen deliberation central to 'strong' forms of democracy.

I began my investigation by exploring three cyber-democracy 'camps' that I identified as dominant within cyber-democracy rhetoric and practice. First, I looked at the liberal individualist camp, in which a democratic model or practice gains legitimacy by providing for the free expression of individual interests. Second, I examined the communitarian camp, in which a democratic model or practice is legitimated by its enhancement of communal spirit and values. Finally, I introduced the deliberative position. Here a democratic model or practice is legitimated by its facilitation of rational discourse in the public sphere – the communicative space between private affairs and official decision making which brings private individuals together to form a public opinion by which to hold official decision makers accountable.

My investigation of the Internet has focused upon the deliberative position because it offers a more powerful democratic model. Both the liberal individualist and communitarian models posit a unitary subject, whether as the isolated ego or as the undifferentiated communal identity. As such, both fail to take seriously the multiple differences between subjects within pluralistic societies. Moreover, both assume a pre-discursive subject that requires only a weak notion of political discourse: democracy is either equated with the strategic competition between pre-determined interests or subsumed within the ethically integrated community. In contrast, dialogue and difference are central to the deliberative model which is based upon the inter-subjective encounter. The model emphasizes the transformation of privately-oriented individuals into publicly-oriented citizens through rational-critical dialogue. This not only puts discourse at the centre of democracy but also takes difference seriously as it demands that subjects listen and attempt to come to an understanding of others. Furthermore, the deliberative model strongly promotes practical rationality – more reasonable positions result as subjects come to be reflexive in the presentation and defence of their positions.

My interest in the deliberative camp is furthered by the affinity that seems to exist between many cyber-interactions and the public sphere. The multitude of two-way, decentred communications of cyberspace taking place through a vast array of Usenet groups, e-mail lists, Web forums, Web publishing, MUDs, and chat rooms seem to offer an opportunity for the development of the deliberative situation and the enhancement of the public sphere. This promise has up to now gone unexplored via in-depth empirical research. In this thesis I have attempted to bridge this gap in the research. My aim has been to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. My interest has been both descriptive and political. Not only have I sought to discover the extent to which the Internet is enhancing the public sphere, I have also attempted to identify ways to further advance online deliberation. As such, I have followed the critical research tradition that seeks not just to describe the world but to change it.

To undertake this research project I have drawn upon Habermas' work because it provides a set of critical conceptions around questions of the public sphere and communications media. In Chapter Two, I utilized the theory of communicative action to develop a critical norm of the public sphere (Figure 2.2) by which to analyse the possibility of the Internet enhancing democratic deliberation. This normative conception sees the public sphere as a space constituted by communicative rationality, specifically by moral-practical discourse that is autonomous from both the state and corporate interests. The theory of communicative action also provides the system-lifeworld formulation that contextualizes the public sphere within

social evolution and more specifically within the rationalization processes of modernity and the development of modern state-capitalism. Such a contextualization not only points to the normative basis of the public sphere but also to cultural and social logics that indicate its possibilities and limitations within present social conditions.

The theory of communicative action has attracted much criticism. Criticism relevant to my analysis in this thesis was explored in Chapter Three. I began by considering critiques that argued that a normative conception such as the public sphere simply cannot be developed without drawing upon discredited metaphysics. In response, I outlined how Habermas' theory of communicative action is able to provide a normative yet postmetaphysical grounding for the public sphere conception. However, I also argued that my analysis can largely sidestep critique of Habermas' analytical or 'scientific' derivation of universal rationality, and instead focus more narrowly upon questions of the public sphere's democratic claims and pragmatic usefulness in relation to my research problem. In this regard, two significant criticisms need to be confronted. First, it is often held that Habermas' theory of communicative rationality downplays and even ignores affective-aesthetic aspects of discourse and so leads to exclusions of certain cultural styles and voices. Second, a number of critics maintain that the public sphere is a modernist conception and cannot be applied to an essentially postmodern phenomenon like the Internet. I responded to the first charge by demonstrating, through a re-reading of the requirements of rational-critical discourse, that the public sphere norm does in fact make room for the aesthetic-affective aspects of discourse. I responded to the second criticism by showing that the impact of the Internet upon social relations is neither as hyper-real as some postmodernists would have nor outside the evaluative scope of the public sphere conception. Thus, after much reflection, the public sphere conception of Figure 2.2 remained intact as a critical concept for the evaluation of online discourse.

Chapter Four developed an appropriate methodological framework for the evaluation of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere. After critically reviewing three media-technology research strands that Internet research presently draws upon, I argued the need for a multiperspectival approach that takes into account three determinations: structural, technological, and uses. I suggested that such an approach is supported by Habermas' two-level system-lifeworld conception, which takes into account structural determinations at the system's level (significantly those of the economy and the state) and uses determinations at the lifeworld level. Technological determinations are part of both the system and the lifeworld. This two-level approach, combined with the public sphere conception, provided

the comprehensive methodology for my critical analysis of the possibility of the Internet enhancing the public sphere within contemporary society.

8.2 Evaluation and Findings

Chapter Five focused upon the system's level. I first provided a contextualization for the system-Internet relationship through a political economy of contemporary state and economic affairs, a contextualization which showed the ongoing colonization of the lifeworld by system's media. I then investigated the history of the Internet, showing that state and corporate interests are largely behind Internet developments. This conclusion lead to an investigation of the main question addressed in Chapter Five: what is the impact of the delinguistified media of money and administrative power upon online deliberations. Two requirements of the public sphere conception became particularly important in the analysis of the system's influence over cyber-interactions: autonomy and access. Despite formal accessibility, the social maldistribution of the resources necessary for participation online (time, money, education, and so on) limits entry to cyber-interactions. In addition, state and commercial interests continue to pose threats to the autonomy of cyber-interactions. In particular, individualized and privatized interactions are dominating online discourses. However, semi-autonomous spaces of communicative interaction continue to ride on the back of the Internet's privatized and administratively controlled infrastructure.

To examine whether rational-critical discourse takes place within the semi-autonomous cyberspaces, and to evaluate the quality of any deliberation that does take place, I turned in Chapter Six to the lifeworld level and specifically to an analysis of the public interactions of cyber-culture. I compared Internet interactions with the public sphere conception, particularly the five more discursive requirements that were not so explicitly addressed in Chapter Five: the reasoned exchange of criticizable validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, and discursive equality. Drawing upon relevant research and my own observations, I showed that a diversity of cyber-interactions can be found in which people are putting forward and critiquing each other's claims. In a number of areas, such discourse comes close to the requirements of communicative rationality. However, I also identified a number of impediments that block online discourse from more fully approximating the public sphere conception. The main problems, aside from the exclusions and systemic incursions highlighted in Chapter Five, are: a lack of reflexivity, lack of respectful listening and commitment to working with difference (leading to the fragmentation of cyberspace into interest groups), lack of verifiable information including identity claims, and the domination

of discourse (particularly through an agonistic style of speaking) by certain individuals and groups.

In Chapter Seven I explored these limitations further by examining the case of Minnesota E-Democracy, an Internet-democracy project that explicitly attempts to foster an online deliberative public. My investigation focused on whether or not this initiative was able to overcome many of the limitations evident in more anarchic cyber-discourse. From my observations of the online discourse and interviews with key project organizers, I found that high levels of reflexivity, respectful listening, sincerity, and commitment to deliberations have been attained. I argued that Minnesota E-Democracy has been able to achieve these results in a number of ways, including through the use of structured e-mail lists, the formalization of rules and guidelines, the careful management of the forums in ways that encourage good deliberative practice, the encouragement of self-ownership and self-moderation, and the focus on offline political issues.

Despite such successes, there remain significant problems that must be overcome. There is a need to develop greater reflexivity, respectful listening to difference, and deliberative equality. The most serious problem identified is a lack of representation of a broad demographic of the 'target population' in the deliberations. A further question hanging over Minnesota E-Democracy and similar forums is how online public opinion can effectively feed into formal decision making. I explored this question in the second part of Chapter Seven. I looked at the extent to which public opinion developed online can feed into official decision making through a case study of the United Kingdom Online Democracy (UKCOD) initiative, an online democracy initiative that has attempted to facilitate both public-to-public interaction and public-to-government consultations. While UKCOD's consultations were successful in allowing a number of individuals to directly express their opinions to government officials, the formation of public opinion through online deliberation was neglected. This emphasis upon the direct expression of interests tends to promote liberal individualist over deliberative politics. In order to encourage the latter, the focus must be upon the development of rational-critical deliberations that foster informed and politically active citizens.

Unfortunately, few online participants are choosing to be involved in Internet deliberations. Instead they are being drawn to online shopping, private interaction, and virtual support groups. When people do go online for political purposes they tend to do so through liberal individualist forms of participation or through common interest groups rather than deliberative forums. Furthermore, deliberative spaces like Minnesota E-Democracy are

constituted by the discourses of those who are politically active and influential offline. Under the present circumstances, online deliberations will at best re-produce a contemporary version of Habermas' story of the bourgeois public sphere, a story that culminates in an elite discursive space increasingly sidelined by the commercialization of the medium and by more populist forms of political participation.[1]

8.3 Expanding the Public Sphere through the Internet: Possibilities and Recommendations

Despite frequent criticisms, the public sphere conception is highly relevant and useful for the analysis of the Internet. Moreover, there are active spaces for semi-autonomous rational deliberation online that in various ways approximate and extend the requirements of the public sphere. There are also a range of deliberative democracy projects that actively seek to foster the development of public opinion by structuring online discourse. However, online deliberative forums are increasingly marginalized as cyberspace comes to be dominated by commercialized and privatized activity and as online public interaction becomes dominated by virtual communities and liberal individualist practices. Furthermore, limited accessibility and the stratification of cyber-participation reduce the democratic legitimacy of public opinions developed online.

A colonization of cyberspace by instrumental-strategic reason is taking effect, threatening to either marginalize or to transform and incorporate the public spaces of communicative rationality, spaces that are already limited by a lack of representation resulting from systemically induced socio-cultural stratifications. Following Habermas, the best response to such systemic colonization is to stimulate public spheres in order not only to hold at bay instrumental reason, but also to react back upon it. The solution to problems with deliberation is to actively promote and build further deliberation based upon the communicative dialogues already taking place. Despite their problems, the Internet's present deliberative forums, both informal and organized, offer the basis from which we can extend both online and offline deliberative culture. These forums should be protected and resourced. As well as encouraging regulation to curb surveillance and censorship, industry

[1] This parallel is evident with the commercialization and popularization that has taken over the Internet and the institutionalization of administrative power via liberal democratic structures setting themselves up online. However, the parallels between Habermas' account of the bourgeois public sphere and Internet developments should not be overdrawn, not least to avoid the risk of making the early (very unrepresentative) Internet seem more democratic than it was. Furthermore, whereas the expansion of the welfare state was one of the factors undermining the bourgeois public sphere, state involvement has always been a central part of the Internet story.

policies to promote the development of public spaces online must be seriously considered. Such policies may include according the Internet common carrier status and placing restrictions on vertical integration. Financial support is also desperately needed to enable deliberative projects to not only survive, but also to expand, multiply, and improve. If non-government organization or foundation funding cannot be raised, government funding along the model of public service media should be considered. Revenue could be raised from Internet taxation.

However, having the institutions in place for deliberation and securing their protection does not necessarily mean that people will come on board. An online deliberative public will not develop without the political will towards deliberation in the first place. As Chambers (1996:196) says,

> In a world where negotiation, instrumental trade-offs, and strategic bargaining are the most common routes to reaching collective "agreement" and resolving disputes, it is plausible that the most serious barrier to discourse can be found in the conversational habits to which citizens have become used. . . . [E]xpansion [of the public sphere] can take place by opening up opportunities to participate, by including excluded voices, by democratizing media access, by setting up "town meetings" and "deliberative public opinion polls," by politicizing the depoliticized, by empowering the powerless, by decentralizing decision making, by funding public commissions to canvass public opinion, and so on. But all such initiatives will fail to produce a discursively formed public opinion if citizens are uninterested in acting discursively or unwilling to do so.

How can we encourage people constantly bombarded by an online (and offline) consumer culture and used to liberal individualist or communitarian forms of political participation to take part in deliberative spaces? Moreover, how can we increase participation in online forums from poorly represented groups?

Marginalization of online public deliberations will occur as long as commercialism dominates cultural participation and as long as individualized and privatized interaction dominates online politics. A lack of full inclusion and discursive equality within online public spheres will remain as long as there are social inequalities. This conclusion may seem a cause for pessimism. However, as I argued in Chapter Seven, drawing upon the experiences of Minnesota E-Democracy, we can identify a number of ways in which more individuals and a wider representation of the offline target population can be encouraged to

participate in online deliberative forums. We must firstly ensure a safe environment by maintaining respectful and sincere deliberations. We must also employ and develop technology that is user-friendly and accessible. Such efforts are already under way, but further initiatives (and financial support) are needed to develop technology and build deliberative forums that are attractive to different groups and styles of speaking. These forums will need to attract a public that has been taught to be individualist, has a shrinking attention span, and is faced with ever more consumer distractions and low effort, direct modes of political interaction. Making forums attractive includes making them meaningful by linking them into everyday lived reality. That is, deliberations need to be focused upon the offline political problems faced by participants. Deliberative forums must be connected into the networks of informal public debate that already exist, and attract the attention of decision makers. Not everyone needs to take part in online deliberations, but online public opinion must be extended via links (particularly through the mass media) with the complex webs of informal public interaction in everyday life. In this way, the public sphere will be strengthened and extended at local, national, and international levels.

Further research is needed to more precisely identify the range of causes of exclusion from and non-participation in online deliberative spaces. Internet users and non-users need to be more extensively and intensively surveyed than was possible in this thesis. Such surveys need to reveal more about the limits to participation in online deliberation and how the extent and form of participation can be improved. We already know, however, that the public sphere will not be facilitated merely through the diffusion of a technological artefact. This has been clearly shown by a range of studies of democratic projects utilizing computer networks.[2] People must be convinced by the need for deliberation before new technologies can be successfully employed to enhance deliberative democracy. As Barber (1998b:261-263) notes, the application of new technologies within societies dominated by commercial and individualist values and 'thin' models of democratic participation will more than likely 'produce the same uncivility and cynicism that characterize politics in the older technologies, radio and television, for example. . . . If then technology is to make a political difference, it is the politics that will first have to change.' There must be 'a will toward a more participatory and robust civic society.'

However, given that a will towards deliberative democracy already exists to some extent within contemporary civil societies around the globe (including within Internet practices), online discursive spaces are indeed an important means by which the public sphere may be

[2] See for example the studies of Arterton (1987) and Tsagarousianou et al. (1998).

further developed.[3] Those concerned with fostering deliberative democracy in the twenty-first century must promote online deliberative 'experiments' such as Minnesota E-Democracy. More in-depth research is also needed to identify further ways to extend online deliberations and to link these with offline publics, so that they are neither co-opted by administrative power nor sidelined by individualist forms of online politics. In this vein, I hope that this thesis is not only a useful evaluation of the Internet's relationship to the public sphere, showing the ways in which the latter can be extended through cyberspace, but that it is itself a vehicle for the promotion of deliberative culture and sovereign publics.

[3] In Chapter Five I indicated that some social theorists see hope for advancing the public sphere in the rise of civil society in various places around the globe. Deliberative practices can be identified within this new civil society (Barber, 1998a:49-50). While social commentators refer to the development of this civil society in various ways, speaking of new social movements (Habermas), life politics (Giddens), sub politics (Beck), and so on, there is general agreement about a continuing growth in this area of political culture. For instance, '[s]ixty countries report striking growth in NGOs, foundations, and civic associations in the last ten years' (ibid:48).

APPENDICES

Appendix One: Holding Formal Publics Accountable to Public Opinion

The deliberative democratic model demands that public opinion formation is differentiated from public policy making. Habermas (1996:307) distinguishes between 'decision-oriented deliberations, which are regulated by *democratic procedures*, and the informal processes of opinion-formation in the public sphere.' A decentred (rationalized) society maintains the distinction through institutions of formal deliberative decision making (formal or official publics, predominantly the legislature and judiciary) and arenas of public opinion formation (informal publics of civil society).[1] Formal and informal publics have different democratic roles. As Habermas (1996:300, 362) explains,

> only the political system can "act." It is a subsystem specialized for collectively binding decisions, whereas the communicative structures of the public sphere constitute a far-flung network of sensors that react to the pressure of society-wide problems and stimulate influential opinions. . . . The communication structures of the public sphere *relieve* the public *of the burden of decision making*, the postponed decisions are reserved for the institutionalized political process.

Formal publics concentrate narrowly upon forging solutions (or compromises) to immediate political problems (Habermas, 1996:308). Relieved of the task of decision making, informal publics have the flexibility to explore a wider range of problems and viewpoints than is possible within formal publics. Rational deliberation in these informal publics enables 'streams of communication' to be 'filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions' (Habermas, 1996:360).

The separation of the public sphere from direct policy making is not only necessary due to social complexity (the logistical problem of democratic decision making in a large polity)

[1] Formal publics ideally utilise a set of legally institutionalized *procedures* of argumentation in their decision making. To develop an ideal set of such procedures, Habermas (1996:305-306) re-deploys the idealizations of communicative rationality discussed in Section 2.5.2. This formulation is open to attack from many political positions. For instance, political realists would question how useful such a set of 'rules' would be in actual everyday decision making, postmodernists would see universalization of such rules as totalitarian, and loyal Marxists would consider any reliance upon state institutions as bearers of justice as naïve. On the other hand, the formulation could be seen as the best possible

but is also important for maintaining the autonomy of the public sphere from state power.[2] Yet, for public opinion to be effective, the political system must also be 'tied into the peripheral networks of the political public sphere' (Habermas, 1996:298).[3] Public opinion must be able to feed into and influence decision making. It must act as 'a court' before which 'public authority' is compelled to legitimate its decisions (Habermas, 1974:55).

Habermas argues for a strong constitution to guarantee both the autonomy of informal public discourse and the sensitivity of formal publics to public opinion. Constitutional protection of the autonomy of informal public opinion formation is fundamental (Habermas, 1996:171).[4] Citizens must be guaranteed the right to 'confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest' (Habermas, 1974:49). This requires the

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compromise. Unfortunately I cannot enter this debate here. I will confine my discussion to the function of formal publics as they relate to informal public opinion formation.

[2] Balancing the influence of each public is difficult. As Bohman (1996:172-187) points out, Habermas has in recent writings increasingly emphasised that, given social complexity, the need for social coordination must be met by formal decision-making bodies (law and parliament). Informal publics can only act indirectly to influence these bodies: '[t]his influence is limited to the procurement and withdrawal of legitimation' (Habermas, 1992a:452). Bohman believes that such a formulation leads to self-governance being surrendered too much to formal decision-making bodies. He wants to develop a stronger role for the democratic will of public deliberations and proposes that public sovereignty be based upon deliberative majorities. Although I agree with the desire to ensure that informal publics are strong publics, invoking deliberative majorities takes us back towards the direct participatory forms Habermas is trying to avoid. That is, attempts to combine deliberation with decision making normally involve some form of consensus 'forcing' instrument, such as citizen juries or televoting. This links to Fishkin's (1991) promotion of deliberative juries. In contrast, I believe that strong publics can develop through (and rely upon) an autonomous and active civil society reproducing healthy informal public spheres developing critical and effective public opinion.

[3] Deliberative democracy relies upon an *interplay* between these functionally differentiated publics. The idea of an interplay between formal and informal publics responds to Fraser's (1992:219-221) demand that Habermas takes into account the rational deliberative process of sovereign parliaments which act as '*strong*' publics – decision-making publics that facilitate public sovereignty – as well as '*weak publics*' whose 'deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation and does not encompass decision-making.' Habermas (1996:307) has recently accepted the 'weak' and 'strong' labels. I personally dislike the implication that deliberations within informal publics are weak. If we are to insist on the rationality and sovereignty of the informal public opinion, then informal political deliberation must be strong. Hence, I will refer to formal and informal (rather than strong and weak) publics.

[4] The idea of rights as embodied in constitutional law has been emphasised by Habermas ever since STPS (see especially p70-71), where he points to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* of 1789 as an important element of securing and legitimating the deliberations of the bourgeois public sphere in France. Habermas (1996:456) also considers the extension of human rights via international law through institutions such as the United Nations as important for developing a global public sphere. He believes, following Kant, that basic rights require 'an international, legally administered "cosmopolitan society".' But it is not enough, Habermas argues, to have international law courts or international agreements such as the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.* Courts and agreements will only be able to protect rights when backed by a 'United Nations that *can not only pass but also act on and enforce its resolutions*.'

legal protection of individuals, groups, and communities as well as protection of the spaces and means (media) through which they meet (Habermas, 1996:368). The constitutional protection of public deliberations must be accompanied by protection of privacy. Securing a sphere of privacy for lifeworld reproduction is just as important as securing publicity because the public sphere draws upon a secure private sphere. The public sphere 'can assert its autonomy and preserve its spontaneity only insofar as it can draw support from a mature pluralism of forms of life, subcultures, and worldviews' (Habermas, 1996:368).[5]

The protection of public opinion formation is not enough to ensure and maximize public sovereignty. To be politically effective, public opinion must also *underpin* official publics. This requires three things of administrative power. First, decision-making processes must be open to public scrutiny. The disclosure of information is paramount: 'the exercise of political control' must be 'effectively subordinated to the democratic demand that information be accessible to the public' (Habermas, 1974:49). Second, mechanisms are needed that allow public opinion to effectively feed into formal publics: formal processes (elections, consultations) need to be set up and informal mechanisms (communications media, petitions, opinion polls, political parties) protected. Third, administrative power must heed public opinion. This requires the legal institutionalization of regulations ensuring processes of public accountability and the development of deliberative procedures within legislative and judicial branches of government (Habermas, 1992a:449-450). It also demands an effective and accountable executive to carry out the decisions of formal deliberative bodies and thus translate public opinion into democratically driven social programmes.[6]

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[5] Habermas' (1996:312-314) conception of privacy rights goes beyond liberal private-public boundary drawing, arguing for a distinction between the *'thematization'* and the *'regulation of powers'*:

> Certainly the intimate sphere must be protected from intrusive forces and the critical eyes of strangers, but not everything reserved to the decisions of private persons is withdrawn from public thematization and protected from criticism. Rather, every affair in need of political regulation should be publicly discussed, though not every legitimate object of public discussion will in fact be politically regulated. (And not every political regulation touches private responsibilities.) With the help of these distinctions, one can easily show that liberal misgivings about opening up an unrestricted spectrum of public issues and topics are not justified so long, at least, as the personal integrity of the individual is preserved.

Habermas is also able to respond to Foucault's critique of Enlightenment reason which shows how publicity operates as disciplinary power, as supervision and public control, undermining the autonomy of individuals (see Peters, 1993:548; Villa, 1992:714-715). Habermas (1996:312-314, 368-369) recognizes the threat of panopticon power. Yet, he also shows how a constitutionally guaranteed deliberative democracy can reverse the focus of disciplinary publicity. It can protect privacy from the preying eyes of administrative power while opening up administrative power to public scrutiny.

[6] This requires that the 'administration be subject to law and to judicial review (as well as parliamentary oversight)' (Habermas, 1996:169).

The requirements of citizen autonomy and public sovereignty can be summarised in terms of constitutional guarantees as follows:

> *i*) Constitutional law guaranteeing citizenship rights: freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish opinions about matters of general interest, and privacy rights.
>
> *ii*) Constitutionally-guaranteed sovereignty of public opinion: formal publics responsive to public opinion; disclosure of information pertinent to public deliberation; effective mechanisms of feed into formal decision-making bodies; accountability of formal decision-making bodies (judiciary and legislature) and the executive; and the judiciary and legislative public guided by formal deliberative procedures.

Formal publics (law, parliament) can help *maximise* the impact of public opinion upon decision making. However, they are not *necessary* for public deliberation. Public authority becomes responsive to informal public opinion through informal mechanisms such as the media and civic protest, as well as through formal democratic processes. Such informal mechanisms allow public opinion to become effective even in less than democratically ideal political climates. In fact, formal democratic process comes into existence as a result of the demands of an active public. As with the bourgeois public sphere, sovereignty needs to be *won* and *inserted* into the order of the constitutional state (Habermas, 1974:50). Thus, strong democracy begins with the demands and actions of a deliberating public.

Appendix Two: Social Equality and the Public Sphere

The public sphere requirements of inclusion and discursive equality cannot be fully satisfied given ongoing social inequality. Habermas (1996:306, see especially n23) agrees with Cohen (1989) and Fraser (1992) that the public sphere becomes distorted by social inequalities. The public sphere must, according to Habermas (1996:308),

> enjoy the support of a societal basis in which equal rights of citizenship have become socially effective. Only in an egalitarian public of citizens that has emerged from the confines of class and thrown off the millennia-old shackles of social stratification and exploitation can the potential of an unleashed cultural pluralism fully develop . . .

Habermas follows Cohen in arguing that deliberative discourse needs substantive equality to the extent that the existing distribution of power and resources does not affect inclusion or the ongoing equality of deliberation.[1] The level of substantive equality needed is thus determined by what level of inequality will impact upon deliberations – what is needed for equal access to deliberative resources and capabilities. Yet, it seems clear that any amount of social maldistribution will lead to a degree of discursive inequality. As Fraser (1992) and Bohman (1996) observe, it is impossible to insulate the public sphere from social inequalities.[2] As such, Fraser (ibid:208) argues, 'it is a necessary condition of participatory parity that systemic social inequalities be eliminated.' So, in ideal terms, there must be full social equality to ensure participatory inclusion and discursive equality. This, as Chambers (1996:207) notes, requires radical social re-distribution. But this cannot be achieved democratically, Chambers notes, without deliberative publics in the first place because questions of distribution are questions of justice and the subject of discourse. This discourse 'must start within the existing system, in which systemic inequalities have not yet been eliminated. In other words, we must find a way of talking with each other as equals about

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[1] Compare T.H.Marshall's call for civil, political and social rights – where substantive social rights are required for political equality. See Baynes (1995:210-212) for a more detailed discussion of the basic categories of rights that Habermas develops in discourse theory. See Bohman (1996:119-132) for further appraisal of the need for access to deliberative resources and capabilities to overcome deliberative disadvantage.

[2] The attempt to insulate politics from social inequalities is often an important aspect of liberal democratic theory and practice (Fraser, 1992:207-208). For instance, Fraser (1992:208, n11) points to the liberal rules that guard against state and economic interference in political campaigning. Rather than translate into substantive inclusion and equality, formal standards of inclusion and equality can actually obscure the social inequalities that infiltrate deliberations.

the elimination of systemic inequality before we can eliminate it.' Practically speaking, then, we must start from a condition of inequality and build towards greater equality through strong public deliberations. Fraser (1992:207) admits to this limitation of really existing publics. She suggests, given ongoing social stratification, the thematization of inequalities.[3] As seen from the requirement in Figure 2.2 of sincerity or openness, Habermas agrees. Habermas (1996:306) emphasizes the public relevance of matters of 'unequal distribution of resources on which the actual exercise of rights of communication and participation depends.' Against a 'bracketing of status differentials', a bracketing which Fraser (1992:204) believes to be operating in Habermas' STPS notion of the public sphere, argumentation requires that participants disclose those aspects of their identity that may impact upon the equality and inclusivity of discourse. Of course, the level of social inequality will continue to have a direct bearing upon the extent of deliberative disadvantage. At the end of the day, therefore, the utopian projection of substantive social equality amongst members of a public offers an important standard against which to measure the health of any really existing public sphere.

[3] Chambers (1996:207) suggests that this 'thematizing could involve, for example, challenging unfair advantage in the public sphere due to social and economic position; introducing the effects of privately owned and profit driven media on the circulation of information in discussion; and in general investigating the way social and economic subordination filters into and distorts the public sphere.' I see such thematizaton as a central part of my task in this thesis.

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