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Digital divide or discursive design? On the emerging ethics of information space

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ON THE EMERGING ETHICS OF INFORMATION SPACE

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Abstract:

This article seeks to identify, theoretically, some broad ethical issues about the type of space which the Internet is becoming, issues which are closely linked to developing new agendas for empirical research into Internet use. It seeks to move away from the concept of 'digital divide' which has dominated debate in this area while presuming a rather static notion of the space which the Internet is, or could become. Instead, it draws on deliberative democracy theory in general and John Dryzek's concept of 'discursive design' in particular to formulate six types of issue (Convergence, Who Converges?, Deliberation, Public Action, Relations to the State, and Long-term Patterns of Practice) around which both empirical research and ethical debate can focus, and which taken together will help answer whether the Internet is, or can be, in part a 'discursive design' which contributes to the conditions of democratic public life.

Keywords:

Deliberative democracy; digital divide; discursive design; Internet architecture; public space; public sphere.

DIGITAL DIVIDE OR DISCURSIVE DESIGN?
ON THE EMERGING ETHICS OF INFORMATION SPACE

What type of space will the Internet become? In his recent book, *The Internet Galaxy,* Manuel Castells has argued for a fundamentally positive view of the potential of the Internet (since it makes possible 'for the first time the communication of many to many in chosen time, on a global scale'), [1]* but also for an empirically-based caution about whether this potential will be realised and for whom. Many would agree, but the question remains: what are the modalities for researching emerging inequalities in the structure of Internet use and access? Or, put another way, what might a debate about the ethics of The Internet as information space look like?

As its title suggests, this article attempts to move away from discussion couched exclusively in terms of the 'digital divide' and towards another, more open, formulation: discursive design. 'Discursive design' is a term from political theory, specifically John Dryzek's version of deliberative democracy theory,[2]* and we will come to its definition later, but first it is important to explain the changes of emphasis which this latter term implies for understanding the organisation of the Internet as information space, or rather a collection of overlapping information spaces.

A good standard definition of the term we need to move away from - 'digital divide' – has recently been offered by Ronald Rice: 'the differential access to and use of the

[1] Manuel Castells. *The Internet Galaxy.* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, page 2.

[2] John Dryzek *Discursive Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1990.

Internet according to gender, income, race and location'.[3]* As a current definition, this is useful since it incorporates an important shift in digital divide debates, from mere 'access' to 'access and use' (more on this below). Even so, this definition gives little sense of how the structure of information space, to which individuals are understood to have access or to put to use, may itself be articulated with changing patterns of access and use. 'The Internet' in this definition is inert, preformed, simply 'there'. This closes down questions about the changing nature of the Internet as information space or, more broadly, 'communication space', and goes hand in hand with limited curiosity about the agents who have such access or make such use. Certainly they are more than the units switched 'on' or 'off' assumed by early digital divide debates, but all the same Rice's definition does not mention the definitional issues embedded within changing forms of use. As Roger Silverstone argued long ago, information and communication technologies are doubly articulated, both as media that have significance in themselves and as media for carrying specific sets of meanings.[4]* People articulate the meanings of information and communication technologies, partly in accordance with habits and fixed formulas, of course, but partly also through explicit reflection as thinking individuals. It is this deliberative aspect of Internet use, and the recognition that people may also be divided along this dimension, which are absent from Rice's definition.

This takes us to an important point that is different when we apply the notion of 'discursive design' to the Internet; it encourages us to see that the Internet is not mere infrastructure (whose organisation, once in place, can be safely black-boxed, insulated from further deliberation). On the contrary, Internet infrastructure is, and should remain, open to deliberative intervention and ethical inquiry. That is one implication of the term 'discursive design'. To emphasise this is, however, to go against understandings of the Internet as a privatised space of individual market consumption, which by definition is both outside of all but the most obvious public policy concerns (decency, criminality, and so on) and need contain no spaces for public deliberation about anything, including its own architecture. We reach here what Oscar Gandy has recently called 'the real digital divide': the widening division between consumer and citizen discourses.[5]* To discuss the ethics of the Internet as information space is, precisely, to insist that questions of citizenship are at stake in the Internet's architecture, questions for civic deliberation which go beyond the purely formal rules necessary for market functioning.

This is not, of course, to suggest that the Internet is only, or even primarily, a space for public deliberation or citizenship practice: that would be absurd, both in principle

[3] Ronald Rice, Primary Issues in Internet Use. In Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone, editors, *Handbook of New Media*, pages 105-129. Sage, London and Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002. Quote at page 106.

[4] See discussion in Robin Mansell and Roger Silverstone, Introduction. In *Communication by Design: The Politics of Information and Communication Technologies*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996.

[5] Oscar Gandy. The Real Digital Divide. In Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone, editors, *Handbook of New Media*, pages 448-460. Sage, London and Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002.

and fact. The Internet is many different spaces (of entertainment, general information, private communication, and, potentially at least, public deliberation) that overlap with each other and also connect with a wide range of non-virtual spaces (from the football ground to dance venue, from shopping mall to trading floor and political meeting). This heterogeneity should not deter general theorisation. The issue is not whether the Internet as a whole can be appropriated as political and civic space (clearly it cannot), but whether it is a communication space where the political and the civic will, in the long-term, have any purchase.

Since its early days, there have been pessimistic arguments that the Internet is inimical to politics and civic participation,[6]* even if others have seen in the Internet's communicative architecture the birth of a new type of participatory politics.[7]* More recently, US empirical research has suggested that long-term Internet use and facility leads not to more, but to less, sense of online community, as Internet access and use becomes incorporated ever more securely into private routines.[8]* Against this background, this article will look closely at the factors which might make a difference, long-term, to the emergence of public, civic zones on the Internet. First, however, we must examine in more detail the limitations of the 'digital divide' concept as a starting-point for unlocking the ethics of the Internet as information space.

Beyond the 'Digital Divide'

In the second half of the 1990s, many national and international organisations became exercised by the possibility that new media technologies (above all, the explosive growth of the Internet and World Wide Web) would widen, not narrow, global inequalities. While the main arena for this concern was international, in some cases (the US under Clinton, the UK under Blair) this concern was given a national focus as well; if inequalities in access to the Internet, or other media, are most extreme at the international level, they can hardly be ignored within nations either.

The motivation for such concern was always at least partly economic: projected exponential growth in markets from the new online connections between consumers and businesses became an exponential loss of opportunity, once those who could not afford a computer, modem, or even the cost of the local phone call, were taken into account. The gap between early cyberhype and brutal economic reality was so

[6] See Dan Thu Nguyen and Jon Alexander. The Coming of Cyberspacetime and the End of the Polity. In Rob Shields, editor, *Cultures of the Internet*, pages 99-124. Sage, London and Thousand Oaks, 1996. See also chapter 5 of David Trend, *Welcome to Cyberschool*. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MA, 2001.

[7] Mark Poster. Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public sphree. In David Porter, editor, *Internet Culture*, pp. 201-217. New York: Routledge, 1997.

[8] Barry Wellman et al. Does the Internet Increase, Decrease or Suplement Social Capital? *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(3): 436-455, 2001.

obvious in development contexts that different approaches had to be found, and the increasing emphasis on establishing social or public access to new media technologies, through telecentres and the like, was designed to address this. The West's vision of a virtual consumer revolution needed major adjustment when, as one helpful recent report put it, 'a minimum of 676 million households worldwide – almost all of them in developing countries – would be unable to afford private rather than public access to telecommunications',[9]* let alone computers and operating software. Over time, however, rhetoric shifted away from the political liabilities of 'Digital Divide' to the more comfortable 'Digital Opportunity', blowing the cover on the market imperatives underlying the former. Leading the way here were the proposals submitted by the World Economic Forum to the G-8 Kyushu-Okinawa 2000 summit, under the title 'From The Global Digital Divide to the Global Digital Opportunity'. This argued that:

> 'instead of fixating on the existence of a divide, it would be far better to focus our attention on the "global digital opportunity", because that is what really confronts us today – an unprecedented opportunity to move swiftly up the path towards global digital development . . .'[10]*

in other words, the opportunity not so much to avoid social exclusion and division as to expand markets.

The more lasting problem with digital divide discourse, however, is its fairly shallow understanding of the divides to which media technologies can give rise. Inequalities in ownership of media technologies are discussed, with insufficient (if any) emphasis on use, let alone effective use for the purposes of citizenship. Here is a passage from one of the more reflective and considered reports in the field:

> 'There are imaginative ways to appeal to children and youths - through brand names, sport or entertainment stars, kids clubs where they can play or make e-mail friends around the world. Once they are engaged the media can then be used to pass important information, for example on sexual health, HIV/AIDS.'[11]*

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[9] Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation. Information and Communication Technologies in the Commonwealth. Report for the Commonwealth ICT Expert Group. London, 2001. Quotation from page 23.

[10] World Economic Forum. From the Global Digital Divide to the Global Digital Opportunity. Report to the G-8 Kyushu-Okinawa Summit. Accessed from http://www.wetforum.org/digitaldivide.nsf/ 1 April 2001, quotation at page 10.

[11] OECD. Report of Joint OECD/ UN/ UNDP/ World Bank Global Forum, Exploiting the Digital Opportunities for Poverty Reduction. OECD, 2001. Accessed from http://www.oecd.org/dac/digitalforum/ 1 April 2001, quotation at para 10.

Entertainment or public health information is, here, the most ambitious target for broadening access: what of the other dimensions of actual and potential use? The last of the Clinton Administration's important series of Department of Commerce reports under the title 'Falling Through the Net' announced the achievement of 'full digital inclusion' yet acknowledged in passing that its research into the US digital divide had looked purely at access, rather than capacities or quality of use:

> 'although this survey did not collect data on the intensity or the quality of Internet use, where an individual uses the Internet – at home, away from home, or both – probably reflects some degree of the quality of his or her Internet access' (added emphasis). [12]*

Yet buried in this casual admission is an obscure sense ('probably') that the social context of Internet access and use matters, in fact matters a great deal.

Recent British Government reports in this area have been more explicit on this point, with a UK Cabinet Office Report on 'Closing the Digital Divide' acknowledging the 'urgent need for comprehensive data' on the relative unwillingness of the most disadvantaged groups to take up new media 'opportunities'.[13]* This last report references, in passing, an innovative US study by The Children's Partnership that researched extensively whether 'low-income and underserved Americans' were satisfied with the online content that they accessed. This US report found that 'a new dimension of the digital divide is beginning to take shape, one with a profound impact on young people and those who guide and teach them: content'.[14]* That is, the lack of accessible, comprehensible content that would help the disadvantaged to improve their position (through training courses, job searches and so on), or simply feel a sense of community. The same report (page 21) suggested that 'appropriate content' was not enough: people 'want to be in a place where others in their community are doing the same thing and where they can count on coaching and support their confidence, answer the questions and guide them in new directions'. Once more, we find that a serious attempt to address the digital divide's policy implications requires attention to the social context of Internet use and the dimensions of social and symbolic exclusion against which it becomes regular and effective, if at all. This is exactly the conclusion of the best recent Internet research, for example Rob Kling's work on the 'next-

[12] Quotation from Part II, first paragraph under heading 'Location of Internet Use' of US Department of Commerce. Falling Through the Net: towards digital inclusion – a report on Americans' access to technology tools. Washington, DC, October 2000. Accessed from http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttnoo/Frontoo.htm, 11 October 2002.

[13] Section 3.3 of UK Cabinet Office. Closing the Digital Divide: Information and Communication Technologies in Deprived Areas. London, 2000. Accessed from http://www.pat15.org.uk/download.htm, 11 October 2002.

[14] Quoted from page 12 of The Children's Partnership, *Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Americans*. Accessed from http://www.childrenspartnership.org/ 11 October 2002.

generation Internet', and the importance for effective use of networks of social or family support.[15]*

An underlying problem here is the way that the 'digital divide' concept emerged in relation to telecommunications. Telecommunications is in principle a simpler medium than the Internet, not only because the latter is both interactive and distributive, but also because it is the medium of more complex and open-ended types of use. As recent research has shown, there are enormous differences in what 'heavy' Internet users and 'light' Internet users do when they switch on their computer and modem.[16]* Heavy internet users, particularly those with broadband access, are much more likely to spend their time online sending their own documents and information, rather than receiving public information.[17]* Light internet users, by contrast, may do little more than access their Web server, look at the headlines and a few links, and check a train time via a familiar search route. Are these two uses to be given the same weight in measuring the digital divide, particularly across a rich and extremely diverse nation such as the United States? Surely not, nor can such differences be dismissed as matters of individual taste. To assume that would be to ignore the sheer complexity of what is on offer online. The vast online universe of information and entertainment cannot be assumed to be a universal good, having the same value to everyone. The use you or I make of the Internet depends not only on the speed and reliability of our modems and our individual predilections, but on our particular needs and capabilities to do something with the resources we believe are available online. This is why The Children's Partnership report represented such an important step-forward in policy-based research on Internet use; it talked to people about how they used, or did not use, the Internet and how they thought about it. The barriers to effective Internet use may be subtle indeed. 'Low-income people think they're not legitimate information producers', said one community adviser interviewed by the Children's Partnership.[18] Suppose this were true and widespread; it would surely be a barrier to the expansion of 'full' internet use. 'Social context' here is a complex matter, inextricably connected with how people think about Internet use, and its actual or possible purpose.

Some historical perspective may be helpful in formulating the issues here. The emergence of an information and communication technology is always, in part, the slow process through which particular technological possibilities are articulated into specific social and cultural contexts of action, so that merely potential uses become not only actual but stable. But we cannot stop there. For just as important as the explicit contexts of use are the implicit hierarchies that emerge around use: hierarchies between spaces of use and non-use, hierarchies between users and non-

[15] Rob Kling. Can the "Next-Generation Internet" Effectively Support "Ordinary Citizens"? *The Information Society*, 15: 57-63, 1999.

[16] James Katz, Ronald Rice and Philip Apsden. The Internet, 1995-2000: Access, Civic Involvement and Social Interaction. *American Behavioral Scientist*: 45(3): 405-419, 2001.

[17] Pew Internet and American Life Project. *The Broadband Difference*. Washington, DC, 2002. Accessed from http://www.pewinternet.org/ 11 October 2002.

[18] Quoted Childrens' Partnership, 2000, page 24.

users. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argued in relation to the development of a European literary elite in the 17 and 18th centuries,[19]* the printed book and journal did not simply enable new forms of connection (the proto-public sphere of the London coffee-house); it also enabled new forms of social and spatial hierarchy to emerge (the coffee-house versus the market-square). Seen historically, the issue, as Robert Wuthnow puts it, is how around the technology of the book new 'institutional frameworks' emerged for producing and exchanging information and new 'action sequences' developed as individuals and groups came to organise their time around the information flows which printed matter made possible.[20]* We can ask similar questions about the Internet: what, in the longer-term, are the types of institutional framework and social and individual habits that will coalesce around the Internet and the changes in information flow it enables? The point is not, of course, to predict the future (a futile occupation, as Castells emphasises), but, first, to work towards formulating what might be the key priorities for empirical research in studying Internet use and, second (the particular concern of this article), to formulate the key ethical questions which possible Internet architectures generate.

It might seem presumptuous to argue that Internet infrastructure raises ethical issues. Is there not a danger, as Pippa Norris has argued in her trenchant account of digital divide debates, of confusing the specific issues raised by the Internet itself (if any) and underlying social issues, which are worked out not just through Internet use but through everything else?[21]* Certainly, but that does not mean there are no issues raised by the infrastructure of the Internet: just as there is in public space generally, so too on the Internet there is a politics of speech, which concerns what can (and cannot) be said where.[22]* The structure and ethics of information space, as with all space, can only be understood in terms of its patterns of presence and absence, connection and disconnection, participation and hierarchy. It is time now to try and make these abstract points more specific, working outwards from the questions suggested by the concept of 'discursive design'.

Discursive Design

All imported theoretical terms carry historical baggage, but 'discursive design' carries more than most. Its proposal by US political philosopher John Dryzek makes little sense initially outside the broad context of critical theory and the specific context of deliberative democracy theory. But, if many aspects of critical theory (particularly the work of Adorno and Horkheimer) remains highly controversial, Jurgen Habermas' concept of the 'public sphere'[23]* has acquired such wide currency that it needs little

[19] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Methuen, London, 1986.

[20] Robert Wuthnow. *Communities of Discourse*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 1987, quotations from page 7.

[21] Chapters 3 and 4 of Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide?*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.

[22] See Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

[23] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Polity: Cambridge, 1989.

introduction. Deliberative democracy theory which followed in its wake is, of course, only one approach to democracy but it has generated a wide literature in mainstream political theory debates.[24]* Indeed its basic principle – that democracy should be based on the actual participation in important decisions of all those within a polity affected by such decisions - might receive assent in political contexts well beyond the academy. Strikingly, it is just the Internet's affinity with participative processes that led Mark Poster, in its early days,[25] to see it as a politically positive medium.

John Dryzek represents, however, a particular strand within deliberative democracy theory, which insists it should not be limited to considering the ideal speech situation and the broad principles of democratic participation but must think concretely about the institutional preconditions for any actually existing public sphere. This line of argument has force when many critiques of Habermas' original public sphere model claim it ignored historical and institutional realities.[26]* Dryzek is not alone[27]* in arguing that 'critical theorists have so far failed to generate much in the way of model institutions, still less attempted to apply them to political reality'.[28] Dryzek's concept of 'discursive design' is central to his more pragmatic approach.

Definition

Dryzek defines 'discursive design' as 'a social institution around which the expectations of a number of actors converge [which] . . . therefore has a place in their conscious awareness as a site for recurrent communicative interaction among them . . . as citizens, not as representatives of the state or any other corporate or hierarchical body'.[29] The questions for us here therefore are: will Internet space emerge as a 'discursive design' in this sense and thereby contribute to deliberative democracy? What are the infrastructural conditions for, and potentially against, such a development?

Since I am using 'discursive design' only as a starting-point for a wider series of questions, I will not offer an exhaustive exposition, but some introductory points need to be made. First, the term 'communicative interaction' is a term of art about which a great deal could be said: suffice to say that the consensus among deliberative democracy theorists remains that a crucial component of 'communicative interaction' is rationally-based argument on matters of general, not merely individual,

[24] For an important recent collection, see Seyla Benhabib, editor, *Democracy and Difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995.

[25] Poster, op.cit.

[26] See especially the essays collected in Craig Calhoun, editor, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge,MA., 1992.

[27] Compare Anne Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?* Polity: Cambridge, 1999, pages 116-123.

[28] Dryzek, op. cit., page 40.

[29] Dryzek, op. cit. page 43.

significance. As recent debates have brought out,[30] Habermas' original insistence on exclusively rational debate was too restricting and ignored the mixture of emotion and rationality which characterises most important real-world discussions, but the central importance of some, and indeed an orientating, focus on agreement achieved through rational argument remains. Second, Dryzek assumes that there should be 'a social institution around which the expectations of a number of actors converge' (added emphasis). Once again, recent debates have softened Habermas' original insistence that even in a complex society there should be one, and one only, central site that we can call the 'public sphere', where citizens meet to deliberate: both Habermas in his later work and his follower Seyla Benhabib accept now that the real public sphere is much more like an interlocking network of sites rather than one central site.[31]* Dryzek's stipulation that people's expectations 'converge' around one site is sufficiently loose to accommodate a network of sites. Third, note the importance Dryzek attaches to people meeting 'as citizens' and not as 'representatives of the state or any other corporate or hierarchical body'. A principle of critical theory is that participatory processes happen not under the aegis of the state but in public spaces precisely not controlled by major public institutions: this distinguishes it from democratic theories which prioritise state-focussed processes such as elections. In its anti-statism, deliberative democracy theory shares an important principle with some other influential recent writing about Internet architecture, notably Lawrence Lessig's work.[32]* Fourth, Dryzek in amplifying his definition makes an important point about the extent and nature of deliberation in any discursive design: 'all [its] features should be redeemable within the discursive design itself. Participants should be free to reflectively and discursively override any of all of them'.[33] Less technically, Dryzek is saying that the deliberative process which a discursive design enables should extend to questions of the discursive design's own structure: compare my earlier point that questions of the Internet's architecture and infrastructure need to remain open to ethical deliberation, rather than being black-boxed.

Resulting Questions

What questions are we led to formulate about the ethics of the Internet as information space, once we assume that, in part at least, the Internet should function as a discursive design? I would identify six main areas of questions to be pursued empirically and in terms of their ethical consequences.

1. *Convergence*. Does or can the Internet (or any part of the Internet) operate as a site around which people's expectations of communicative interaction converge? At one level of course yes: there is much general expectation about the Internet as a new communicative medium. But this gives too little weight to the term 'converge' in Dryzek's definition. The key question, at the level of what (for convenience) I will loosely call 'Internet architecture', is about the scale and

[30] See the essays by Benhabib and Young in Benhabib, op. cit.

[31] See essay by Benhabib in Benhabib op. cit. See also Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*.

MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.

[32] Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. Basic Books, New York, 1999, page 208.

[33] Dryzek, ibid.

effectiveness of convergence: this translates into more specific questions about the strength of connections between particular sites and the strength of disconnections between others. One major fear about the Internet is that Internet architecture encourages divergence, not convergence, of social experience, because of its stimulus to increasingly specialised (and exclusive) forms of social connection and information exchange.[34]* Clearly the question of the net balance between connections and disconnections is a matter for (complex) empirical research, not theory, but it is surely a question of ethical significance.

2. *Who converges?* The second question develops the first, and sharpens the distinction between apparent and real convergence. Dryzek's actual definition is vague ('a number of actors converge') but a key principle is, as he notes, that 'no concerned individuals should be excluded and if necessary some educative mechanism should promote competent participation of persons with a material interest in the issues at hand who might otherwise be left out'.[35] In other words, so as far as possible, all citizens should have access to, and effectively participate in, such an information space. Here, we return to issues raised by digital divide debates, but with the proviso that the criterion of adequate access/use is whether people effectively represent their material interests, a much higher criterion than the basic level of access and use that most digital divide discussion implies.
   We can ask therefore: what are the conditions that support or hinder effective participation in online deliberations by all members of a society? Of course, as Norris argues, there is an overlap here with issues of social inequality which have nothing inherently to do with Internet architecture: economic resources, education, status, and so on. That does not mean Internet architecture raises no issues: for, if in everyday practice, people across the board consistently use the Internet as if it were not a space of convergence, but only an infinite information resource from which they as individuals can draw whatever materials they like, as and when they like, and if that practice is reinforced by the formats through which 'the Internet' is presented for use to people in everyday situations, then there is an issue about Internet architecture as it is lived to be addressed. If all the signs and routes in a building point away from the central space where people could, if they went there, meet to discuss what is happening in that building, then that is a question of architecture with consequences for how that building operates as an information space. In the case of the Internet, it is therefore worth asking; does the Internet overall operate as a centripetal or centrifugal space and, if the latter, what are the consequences for politics and social organisation of what is potentially societies' principal communication space operating that way?

3. *Deliberation*. The next question follows on from a possible response to the last point: aren't there many sites on the Internet where people are currently converging in unprecedented fashion to discuss matters of public concern, such as the adequacy of public provision for particular private health issues? In turn, we can pose the question of whether what people do on those sites is truly 'deliberation by citizens' as the definition of discursive design requires. People must come together to debate matters of general interest aware that they do so in

[34] See Trend, op. cit.; cf Cass Susstein, *Republic.com*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999.

[35] Dryzek, ibid.

the capacity of citizens, that is, not just as private individuals but as people who see their deliberations as having wider public relevance.
Considering Nina Eliasoph's recent empirical work[36] on everyday talk about public issues in the US helps bring out the implications of this point for empirical research on online sites. Her central point is that, beneath the surface of the US population's apparent decline in interest in politics, is a more complex picture: people do talk about citizenship issues but in private, that is, in spaces where there are no public consequences of their talk. In public spaces, by contrast, 'politics' is avoided as too contentious. This is an issue about how people imagine both the spaces where they speak and the unwritten constraints (built into those spaces) about what can appropriately said and where. In the case of Internet discussion sites, how do people actually imagine the space in which they are speaking: is it one where talk about formal politics is inappropriate and if so why? Or, more subtly, is it a space where political or civic talk is appropriate, but only because talk there has no public consequences? We return here to the question of connection and disconnection across Internet space. Deliberation is not just talk, but public talk about public issues consciously aimed to have wider public impact, and accountable as such.

4. *Public action*. The fourth question builds on the last. We are concerned with the possibility that in Internet space there might be some sites where public debate not only occurs, but occurs in a context where it can plausibly lead to recommendations for public action. Deliberation within the definition of discursive design must be more than a talking-shop without consequences. This leads to specific empirical questions about how particular online sites of deliberation (if any) are connected, or not, into wider processes of public decision-making and action.

5. *Relations to the State*. The fifth question applies the fourth. What relationship does online deliberation have to the actions of the main actor in public space, the state (similar questions could be asked of the interface with corporate power)? We can have as thriving a world of online deliberation as we like, but if its recommendations are systematically ignored by the state, it will achieve little. Much of what states do, of course, falls outside questions of Internet architecture (and squarely within political science), but again there are ethical questions to which Internet architecture gives rise. What is the strength of connections between online discussion sites and state processes (whether online or offline)? Are there hierarchies among online sites, such that deliberation in certain places has no chance of reaching government, whereas deliberation elsewhere online has a good chance? Such questions are almost embarrassingly general, but this reflects a real gap in knowledge and policy.
As illustration of this, consider this interesting passage from a recent report issued on behalf of the UK government:

'Active and engaged citizens are likely to lead to more effective and informed government. That there is a high level of interest in political issues is borne out by successive opinion polls. Individuals already participate in a variety of activities that have no formal connection with the institutions of democracy. The task for

[36] Eliasoph, op. cit.

government is to link this interest to the political process – and to do so in a way that reflects and responds to changes in the nature of democratic participation. . . . [However] The notion of a formal space on the web where anyone can initiate policy ideas, contribute evidence or debate with others is a long way off.'[37]*

The evidential gap to which this passage refers is borne out if you visit the current version of the UK Government's own experiment in e-democracy, CitizenSpace, at www.ukonline.gov.uk/. You might well want first to click on 'how to contribute effectively'. But if you do, the first instruction you get is 'Be Brief', 'use one short sentence to explain each point you want to make' – hardly an encouragement to open-ended deliberation![38]

6. *Long-Term Patterns of Practice*. We have posed each of the first five questions still fairly abstractly. But, if we have learned anything from digital divide debates it is that abstract formulation is ultimately fruitless unless we translate such questions into more specific questions about people's long-term practices of using the Internet, their habits not only of doing certain things but also of thinking about what they do online in a certain way, as one type of process (say, public deliberation) rather than another. We need then to look at the broader patterns of Internet use, and how they become embedded in particular understandings of what the Internet is. There are of course many actual Internets, [39]* not just one homogenous space, and our sense of 'the Internet' is variously constructed by different people. That does not, however, resolve the question. We must look, as suggested earlier, for patterns not just of presence, but also of absence. What long-term differences will emerge between (I) heavy Internet users and less heavy users or non-users, and (ii) between certain user groups and others, in terms of how each acts in relation to, and thinks of, the Internet as a 'discursive design', that is, as a space where they can converge to deliberate effectively on issues of shared concern? Will the Internet, from this perspective, become in the longer-term a universe of 'secessionary networked spaces' (in the words of two of the most trenchant critics of contemporary cities) with a limited number of highly-lit 'colonies of cohesion' and vast dark spaces of low or zero connection in-between?[40]*
   And, switching our focus from the purely empirical, if, in the longer-term, Internet use becomes divided between a small minority for whom the Internet is (in part) a discursive design, effectively linked to their notion of civic life, and a large majority for whom the Internet is a purely private resource, and if states adapt their notions of e-government around what the former group do (or don't do)

[37] UK Government, Office of the e-Envoy. In the Service of Democracy. HM Government: London, 2002, page 37.

[38] Source www.uklonine.gov.uk/CitizenSpace/ consulted 18 November 2002.

[39] See Daniel Miller and Don Slater. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Berg, Oxford, 2000.

[40] Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin. *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastruture, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition*. London: Routledge, 2001, page 222.

ignoring the latter, then the Internet's architecture will indeed have consequences for social life that can validly be called 'ethical'.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to move beyond existing debates about the Digital Divide, which keep questions of online access and use hermetically sealed from changing notions of what type of space the Internet is, or could become; instead, I have drawn upon John Dryzek's notion of discursive design to focus some questions about how the architecture of the Internet as information space (both objectively and 'subjectively', both as structured and imagined) overlaps with pure questions of use. The aim has been to get a clearer view on a larger question: what type of social space can we expect to emerge from people using, and not using, the Internet in their daily lives in the way they are currently doing (or not doing)? Does this social space have anything in common with the type of space (a discursive design) which deliberative democracy theorists suggest is necessary for a participatory democracy?

This is to assume, admittedly, that the Internet needs, in part, to take on the features of a discursive design, which depends on two further undefended premises: first, that we need spaces which answer to the definition of a discursive design and second, that the Internet will become an increasingly important part of societies' overall public communication space. The second is uncontroversial, but the first is not, indeed it is a political value. It judges the Internet in the same fashion that many previous writers have judged public space, for example the architecture and spatial organisation of our major cities. Just as one generation of social commentators asked whether modern urban public spaces contributed to, or undermined, the conditions necessary for an ethical life, so we can ask the same question of the public (not necessarily civic) space into which the Internet is being transformed. Borrowing the terms of Richard Sennett's devastating 1970s critique of US mediated public life,[41]* will the Internet, over the long term, become 'dead space', merely the 'means of passage to the interior'? Or will it become a true public space, alive with discussion, debate and collective action? Partly these are questions of politics and the whole direction of public discourse and narrative. But, as Sennett has consistently shown, such questions of discourse can never be divorced from the architecture and spatial infrastructure within which people live their public and private lives, and imagine both the boundaries and the connections between them. It is in this sense that the Internet, as information space, raises urgent and still unanswered questions not just for information science, but for political science, sociology and ethics as well.
[6283 words]

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