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Critiques on the participatory potentials of Web 2.0

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Critiques on the Participatory Potentials of the Blogosphere

To blog or not to blog: That is the question? (Marken, 2005)

Introduction

The weblog or blog is a recent and relatively popular phenomenon which is deemed to have the potential to promote citizen participation in the media, and in particular in the production of (critical) media content by 'netizens' (Hauben, 1995). A blog can be defined as an online diary allowing the author(s) to share her/his/their views on a variety of subjects directed at a potentially global, but more often local or micro-publics, while at the same time also implicating its audience into responding and interacting with the content produced by the blogger.

More and more the notion of the blogosphere is being introduced in academic and in popular discourse to indicate the collectivity of weblogs. In doing so the Habermassian notion of the public sphere is invoked (Habermas, 1974/1989). The public sphere refers to a (national) sphere, independent from state and market, where public opinion and consensus is formed through communicative action, through the free and open exchange of rational arguments between status-free citizens. Currently, the Habermassian public sphere could best be understood as *'a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action'* (Villa, 1992: 712). The blogosphere can be deconstructed in a variety of ways: as alternative citizen journalism, as participatory media enabling citizens and activists to produce their own content, as a social platform to communicate with friends and family, and as a vehicle for airing (counter-hegemonic) viewpoints, but also as a propaganda instrument, a marketing tool and a distribution channel. (See: Allan, 2002; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Deuze, 2005; Tremayne, 2006; Keren, 2006; Keen, 2007).

It is therefore not surprising that the blogosphere is characterised by a high degree of diversity – in format, in discourse, and in exposure. Not all blogs have a political character in the strict sense of the word, but the definition of what may be considered political also plays a vital role here. Is the political only regarded from a narrow institutional and procedural perspective, or from a broader perspective, which also includes for example sexual and gender identities, or which sees everyday life as inherently political (de Certeau, 1988; Mouffe, 2005)? From this maximalist perspective of the political, blogs do – in many cases – politicise the private, fuelled by the politics of visibility or *'the struggles for visibility'*, which characterise the *'non-localized space of mediated publicness'* (Thompson, 1995: 247). This radical plurality of the blogosphere, its fragmentation into micro-publics, its semi-deterritorialised nature, its focus on the intimate and on authenticity rather then on the rational and the common good, as well as the hierarchisation of blogs, is not very compatible with a reference to Habermas' public sphere theory. From this perspective an online public sphere seems contradictory. Furthermore, as Dean (2001: 346-7) quite rightly observes:

> to territorialize cyberia as the public sphere is to determine in advance what sort of engagements and identities are proper to the political and to use this determination to homogenize political engagement, neutralize social space, and sanitize popular cultures.

It will therefore be argued that Mouffe's concept of agonistic public spaces as *'places for the expression of dissensus, for bringing to the floor what forces attempt to keep*

concealed.' (Mouffe, quoted in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006: 973-4) is more adequate to encompass the multiplicity of expressions and voices present online. Adopting an agonistic position, which favours radical pluralism above a deliberated consensus, accepts the omnipresence of power processes in social relations and sees conflict as constitutive of the political, is not without dangers. While it can be seen as beneficial to a vibrant (online) civic culture or for the promotion of what Mouffe (1999: 757) calls the *'multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society encompasses', there is also a dark side that merely drives on antagonism and can be destructive for democracy rather then emancipatory (see below).*

Besides a focus on the collectivity of blogs and blogging as a phenomenon, there is also the individual 'blogger' who 'blogs'. One common assumption in recent debates on blogging and interactive media in general, is that the traditional distinction between the amateur and the (professional) producers of the media content is increasingly blurring. In this regard Allan (2002: 127) describes blogging as *'personalised journalism'*, with characteristics such as first-hand eyewitness accounts, and a two-sided communicative process between the producers of content and those who consume it. Gilmor (2006: 18) speaks of a *'conversational mode of journalism'* fueled by blogs and by citizens making their own media. It is in this regard not entirely surprising that several authors have made a connection with the legacy of public journalism by calling blogs 'public's journalism' (Witt, 2004; Haas, 2005). Along the same lines, MacKinnon (2004: 10) suggests that one should speak of an *'information community'* rather than the traditional notion of 'the public'. The idea of the *'active public' (*see Livingstone, 2003), and concepts such as *'prosumers'* (Toffler, 1980) or *'produsers'* (Bruns, 2006) are relevant as well here. A blog, according to famous blogger Rebecca Blood (2002), *'empowers individuals on many levels'*. This is illustrative of an emancipatory perspective towards blogs, empowering citizens.

Blogs, construed as the blogosphere, are thus often associated with the key-concept of equal participation and a higher degree of publicness. Blogs are seen as participatory interactive media, allowing citizens to freely and openly engage in the public sphere, producing their own content and interacting with peers. It is, however, too readily stated that new media bring along revolutionary new relationships, and that these media offer citizens 'new' opportunities to engage or participate independently and critically in the (online) public sphere.This should not be accepted as unequivocal or a given. First, the concept 'new' should still be interpreted from a historic perspective. Every renewal goes hand in hand with processes that reinforce power relations and hegemonies, but at the same time open-up towards new avenues for change (Feather, 1995). In this regard, Slevin (2000: 109) notes that *'[w]hile Internet use may hold out the possibility of emancipation, we must at the same time be aware of how it might create new mechanisms of suppression'*. Second, it therefore also matters what type of participation is attributed to blogs, and in particular, how this participation manifests itself concretely in social, political and economic relations. Carpentier (2007: 88-89) convincingly argues that blogging is characterised by semi-participation: *'Their lack of focus on micro-participation – and on the reduction of power imbalances at the organisational level – renders [blog sites] different from participatory organisations (senso stricto).'* Bloggers are usually individuals dependent on another – often commercial – organisation to publish and blog. Bloggers, seen as participants in discursive spaces, often have only limited control over the content they produce and upload (see further) and embed themselves increasingly in the inherently hyper-capitalist logic of the internet. For example, it is often left unmentioned that if a blogger does not wish to be associated with advertising on their blog, they need to pay between 50 and 900US$ per

year for server-space and the data-traffic that they generate. It is therefore not surprising that Kahn and Kellner (2004: 93) conclude that blogs, and the internet as a medium in itself, form part of a 'revolution' which *'promotes and disseminates the capitalist consumer society, individualism and competition, and that has involved new modes of fetishism, enslavement, and domination yet to be clearly perceived and theorized'*.

It is in other words all too easy to regard the blog phenomenon exclusively in terms of the democratic and participatory potentials and/or the emancipatory agency of individuals. As O'Neil (2005: 18) points out: *'Blogging signifies the extension of networking and linking, but also that of controlling and excluding; however the second part of the equation is not usually acknowledged in male-dominated blogspace'*. Without minimising or disregarding the democratic potentials celebrated above, one should thus also acknowledge the limitations of and constraints to these participative and democratic potentials. As Dahlgren (2004: 6) reminds us, *'there are clear threats to the civic potential of the Internet, and it certainly cannot be seen as offering any 'quick fix' for democracy'*. The focus here is on these threats or the 'second part of the equation', and in this regard five problematic areas can be identified[1]. The first three can be situated at a structural/organisational level, while the latter two relate more to an individual level of analysis:

Structural/Organisational level:
1. Colonisation by the market
2. Censorship by states, organisations and industries
3. Appropriation by political (and cultural) elites

Individual level:
4. Social control by citizens
5. Anti-democratic voices

In what follows, these five constraints will be discussed more in detail, and illustrated with a couple of recent examples.

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[1] Although the digital divide is highly relevant in this context, it is not discussed here. However, access to the information and communication infrastructure, and the knowledge and (media) literacies skills needed to deal with current media in a critical manner, and to search for and find relevant information, are clearly a prerequisite for meaningful participation in an online context (see Norris, 2001; Cammaerts et al., 2003; Livingstone, 2008).

1. Colonisation by the Market

As mentioned before the link between blogs, bloggers and the Habermassian public sphere is problematic on many accounts. The 'blogosphere' is fragmented and not unified, it is often conflictual rather then consensual, and the status of the blogger plays an increasingly important role. However, there is one crucial point where Habermas' historical analysis of the structural transformation of the public sphere remains relevant to online discursive spaces and that is his description of the colonisation or re-feudalisation of the public sphere by capitalist market forces (Dahlberg, 2005).

In recent years, most popular sites hosting blogs, and also social network sites, have been appropriated by large media conglomerates and venture capitalists. Prime examples in this regard are Blogger.com and Blogspot.com, two of the most popular sites hosting blogs, which were taken over by Google. Google also bought the popular video-blog or vlog site YouTube. The developers of the social network site, MySpace, which has blog functions as well, in turn sold their company to Rupert Murdoch's News Corp and Microsoft has a stake in Facebook. This illustrates above all that the dominant media agents are very keen to position themselves in the new digital landscape where the 'consumer' has also become a 'producer'. In addition, maimstream media players also establish their own blog services where readers may host their blogs. A good example here is Guardian Blogs (http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/).

Besides the commodification of blogs and linked to that the online advertising, the growing colonisation of the blogosphere by corporate actors has also resulted in increased concerns and contention regarding the issue of copyright and (intellectual) property. In this regard can be referred to Lessig (2004: ch 10), one of the champions of the Creative Commons initiative,[2] who argues that '*Every realm is governed by copyright law, whereas before most creativity was not. The law now regulates the full range of creativity— commercial or not, transformative or not—with the same rules designed to regulate commercial publishers.*' This conflict manifests itself on two levels: 1) the use of copyright protected material on sites and blogs and in creative productions; 2) the question of who owns the copyright of the user-generated content made by produsers. Both issues present different challenges, from a legal perspective, but also in terms of the consequences for creative citizens. While the share and peer-to-peer culture online and current post-modern creative processes - '*re-using existing artefacts and incorporating bits and pieces*' (Hartley, 2002: 22ff), clearly disrupt the commodification efforts of content by the media industry, the focus here will be on the second conflict, namely the issue of copyright of self-produced content published and shared within a digital environment.

A recent example of the tensions this gives rise to, was the withdrawal of his songs from MySpace by singer-songwriter and activist Billy Bragg. In doing so, Bragg voiced his protest against the rather vague and ambiguous 'terms and conditions' which MySpace asked its users to accept. On his MySpace page Bragg wrote: *The real problem is the fact that they can sub-license it to any company they want and keep the royalties themselves without paying the artist a penny. It also doesn't stipulate that they can use it for non-commercial use only which is what I'd want to see in that clause. The clause is basically far too open for abuse and thus I'm very wary.*[3] MySpace amended its conditions[4] as a result of

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[2] See: http://creativecommons.org/
[3] See: http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/06/08/blly_bragg_myspace/ (Last consulted on: 20/05/2008)

Bragg's protest, but that in itself does not solve the crux of the problem. The aim of the business-model of most so-called Web-2.0 applications is to create a financial surplus value by means of the 'user-generated content' produced for free by individuals. As Kim and Hamilton (2006: 555) conclude in their critical analysis of OhMyNews, that this South-Korean citizen journalism blog-site implements *'an organizational model that broadens the demographics of who can participate, but it also monitors the nature of those contributions while minimizing its own labour costs to its economic benefit.'*

Deuze (2007) draws our attention to a number of additional problematic phenomena that undermine the blogosphere as a critical 'free' democratic public sphere due to its colonisation by the market. He refers to the so-called 'clogs', or corporate blogs, which are becoming more popular by the day. Clogs are in essence extensions of the internal and external marketing and PR strategies of companies. Besides this, Deuze also mentions so-called 'blogolas' and 'flogs', which are in many ways much more problematic as they at the same time feed off and undermine the authenticity claims that are often atributed to blogs. 'Blogola' refers to the payola-practices in the music industry, whereby DJ's and radio stations were paid to play specific music often, and in addition make positive comments about it. This same practice is becoming very common in the unregulated blogosphere[5]. In the U.S. television stations and production companies increasingly shower bloggers with free promotion material, and some even go as far as to offer certain (popular) bloggers pleasure trips for promoting specific programmes (Barnes, 2007). One recent example is a promotion trip that Warner Bros organised for 7 bloggers in the framework of their PR-campaign to launch their new show 'Supernatural'. Another example was the casting of a blogger in the comedy series Scrubs, produced by ABC (Deuze, 2007).

A 'flog' then is a fake blog, or a blog that goes even further than a clog, and could actually be seen as part of a manipulative PR strategy of a company (or industry). Keen (2007: 85) defines floggers as *'bloggers who claim to be independent but are actually in the pay of a sponsor'*. Deuze (2007) mentions the 'Wal-Marting Across America' blog,[6] which reported in 2006 on a road-trip through the U.S. by two apparent Wal-Mart fans, going from Wal-Mart to Wal-Mart. On closer inspection it transpired that the two 'fans' were actually a freelance journalist and a professional photographer employed by the Washington Post and sponsored by Wal-Mart (Gogoi, 2006). It also became apparent that the entire campaign was set up by the PR-firm, Edelman. In addition, Edelman created two other flogs for Wal-Mart: Working Families for Wal-Mart – allegedly a grassroots advocacy group, which is *'committed to fostering open and honest dialogue [...] that conveys the positive contributions of Wal-Mart to working families.'* and PaidCritics.com – devoted to *'exposing'* the connections between labour unions and other vested interests, that are *'smearing Wal-Mart'* (Siebert, 2006).

So, even though the internet was initially based on a non-profit philosophy, its recent history shows that market forces have established themselves as the hegemonic paradigm of the medium. This does not imply, however, that those advocating the not-for-profit ideals of the early internet are entirely absent or passive, on the contrary. The creative commons initiative, open source developments, freeware, free online academic content, the communication rights campaigns are all manifestations of this (Walch, 2002; Lessig 2004;

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[4] See here the most recent version of the terms and conditions of MySpace: http://collect.myspace.com/misc/terms.html?z=1 (Last consulted on: 20/05/2008)

[5] TV and radio in the U.S. are regulated to prevent the old-time practices of payola.

[6] See URL: http://walmartingacrossamerica.com/ and http://edelman.com/

Padovani, 2004). Having said this, the other side of the coin is that the political economy of the new media industry is characterized by an ever more increasing commodification of content, and by concentration trends leading to the creation of oligopolies, both within certain existing niches or across niches (Mansell, 2004; Murdoch and Golding, 2005). In this regard, we can speak of a constant and highly conflictual dialectic between the capitalist paradigm and the communitarian free access paradigm, which will never be entirely resolved. And this is precisely why this conflictual dialectic produces a permanent development and deployment of new strategies by all actors, attempting to reach conflicting aims, but never quite fully achieving these.

2. Censorship and Intimidation by States and Employers

Almost instinctively one links the idea of censorship with questionable practices of authoritarian regimes who have a keen interest in curtailing the freedom of expression of their citizens, something which is highly pertinent when it comes to blogging. However, in (Western) democratic countries, organisations such as universities or industries are also not completely innocent when it comes to censorship, encouraging self-censorship, or in some cases even dismissal of employees because of what they write on their blogs.

Before addressing the employers, the strategies being adopted by (some) states to control the blogosphere will be discussed briefly. According to a recent report of the OpenNet Initiative (ONI), approximately 25 states are actively filtering the internet access of their citizens: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Burma/Myanmar, China, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, UAE, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen (see BBC Online, 2007b). These countries, as well as others who do not filter internet access but do act in a repressive manner politically, see the internet and the free flow of ideas which it enables as a dangerous threat to the social and political status quo and 'stability', be it defined as national security, promoting religious harmony, or to protect some elusive homogenous identity. For one or more of these reasons some states are not happy with individual bloggers claiming their right to freedom of expression by airing their views on the political and everyday matters, which in a repressive context easily become highly political. The Arab world, Asia and especially China, are most active in surveilling, censoring, and ferreting out political dissident debates on the internet.

A recent example of repression of bloggers is the arrest and conviction to three years' imprisonment of the Egyptian activist, Abdel Kareem Soliman, in February 2007. Soliman called Egyptian President Moebarak a dictator, and accused the Islamic university, al-Azhar, of being the breeding-ground for terrorists, and of repressing critical voices. It was generally accepted that Soliman's conviction would act as deterrent for other Egyptian bloggers. However, his conviction led to a campaign of solidarity which resounded not only in Egypt but also internationally (see BBC Online, 2007a). In Iran blogging has also become extremely popular in recent years, and bloggers are regularly intimidated and censored by the Iranian government. In his study on state intervention in the blogosphere by Iran, Khiabany (2007: 25) puts forward that '*the claim over the imminent entering of the world into a distinctly new epoch where time, space, political authority, economies of scale and social relations will become irrelevant is not grounded in reality.*' Above all, what this also demonstrates, is that the so-called anonymity and potential to circumvent state control or coercion, offered by the internet, is mostly overrated.

As already indicated above, not only states watch, intimidate and even arrest citizens for what they post online. Employers also at times react in a repressive manner when confronted with the 'freely expressed' views which their employees post online. Because blogs position themselves right in the middle of an ever-expanding grey zone between the private and the public, some employers regard the deepest stirrings and musings of employees as a threat to the organisation's image, be they for-profit or not-for-profit.

Businesses are becoming ever more active in terms of the surveillance of the online activities of their employees; it often already starts at the recruiting stage. A survey done amongst 800 HR managers by the social software site Viadeo, brought to light that one fifth of the respondents used the internet to obtain personal information about potential candidates, amounting generally to googling these persons. In addition 25 percent of these managers admitted that they did not appoint a candidate on the grounds of information obtained online (Cheng, 2007). It could be claimed that because of the popularity of the phenomenon blogging, and the even greater popularity, especially amongst teenagers and young adults, of social software sites such as MySpace and Facebook, we are increasingly leaving behind an 'internet footprint' in online caches and archives. While Facebook has opened-up its content to search engines like Google, it states that they *'understand [we] may not want everyone in the world to have the information [we] share on Facebook'* and this is why Facebook gives the user *'control of [their] information'* (Facebook, 2007). This shows again that the issue of privacy and protection of online identities are increasingly becoming a pressing issue and that the responsibility for protecting privacy lies squarely with the individual user.

The blogging activity itself can also become a dangerous activity, when found out by employers, especially if the content being posted on their blogs is critical of that particular employer. For some blogging is a way of getting support from an offline community, handling stress, putting the boss in his or her place, demystifying myths, or laughing at the mundane and routine life of an employee. Ringmar (2007: 94) states: *'You blog to stay sane. You blog to stay human'*. But employers often see this quite differently, and regard it as a threat to the carefully constructed image of their business or organisation. *'How the bosses react to such insubordination is easy to imagine. They get upset, they get mad, they reach for the corporate rulebook.'*, Ringmar (2007: 94) concludes. Ringmar himself, a former lecturer at the LSE, caused havoc by voicing his critical and cynical views on his colleagues and department in his personal blog 'Forget the Footnotes'[7]. When his superiors became aware of his blog and its content Ringmar was requested to stop blogging and remove the content of his blog from the internet. He refused to comply with these requests of self-censorship, invoking his freedom of speech and his academic freedom to write what he wants where he wants (MacLeod, 2006). Because of the almost holy character of academic freedom within academia, there was little that the academic authorities could do to him, other than slander his character, which is described in detail in his recent e-book (Ringmar, 2007).

There are, however, numerous other instances where employees were dismissed because of their blogs or what they posted there. One of the first cases was Heather Armstrong who was dismissed by her employer, paradoxically enough a dot.com business, because of the criticism towards her colleagues and employer on her blog Dooce.com (see BBC Online,

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[7] See: http://ringmar.net/forgethefootnotes/ (Last consulted on: 20/05/2008)

2005). The name of her site also became a neologism; 'being dooced' – meaning being dismissed on the grounds of your online activities. Catherine Sanderson (2008) is another striking example. During working hours she was the perfect bilingual secretary, who became *La Petite Anglaise* in her leisure-time, writing about her expatriate life as a single mother in Paris, and sometimes also about her work for a British firm with a sense for the humorous and ironic. However, when her employer found out about her blog, she was dismissed on the spot, even though her employer's name or her real identity was never mentioned in the blog. In March 2007 Sanderson won the court case in France which she brought against her employer, who was subsequently instructed to pay her legal fees as well as one year's salary.

There are more similar examples of employees being 'dooced' (see Ringmar, 2007: 103). These, as well as other cases in this article, illustrate how the weblog has become a space *'neither private nor public, but more exactly private and public at the same time'* (Bauman, 1999: 3). Even though a diary has a very personal and private connotation, placing it online can at the same time also be seen as a way of 'begging' for attention and for recognition from an interested and interactive or passive and lurking (micro) public. However, in this case, the collapsing of the private and the public does not neccesarily lead to the emergence of new collective freedoms as Bauman foresaw, but also opens-up new possibilities of control from the part of employers and states.

3. Appropriation by Political (and Cultural) Elites

Increasingly political and cultural elites have their own weblogs. Such a blog holds many advantages for elites with regard to self-marketing, PR and propaganda strategies. In addition, two mutually reinforcing factors should be taken into account here. First, a blog enables elites to disseminate their ideas (and 'cultural products') independent from the mainstream media, for it allows them (or their spokespersons) to communicate with their fans, supporters, sympathisers or even opponents without intermediaries, and without running the risk that a journalist could twist or 'spin' their words and messages. Second, just by being elites, their blogs are automatically read more often than those of 'ordinary' bloggers. Mainstream journalists are also part of the audience of elite blogs and mainstream media is more likely to pick up on the blog and publish a titbit or a link, thus giving the elite blog and also the politician or pop-star even more publicity and exposure. These two mutually re-enforcing strategies explain why cultural, political and economic elites use blogs ever more frequently. On the one hand there is a pull-movement, whereby fans, sympathisers, etc., are drawn to the blog of their (political and/or cultural) idol. On the other hand, as they are famous to begin with, a push-movement reinforces messages, music and other content posted on the blog, through the mainstream media as well as through hyperlinks on other blogs (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). Besides 'established' elites, the blogosphere itself also produces new elites as a result of what Carr (2005) and Keen (2007) call the present *'cult of the amateur'*. Hierarchisation in the blogosphere gave rise to what is commonly called A-list bloggers, who distinghuish themselves from other bloggers and 'ordinary' citizens, despite a lack of *'training, standards and ethical codes'* (Keen, 2007: 52). The focus here will be on examples of the strategic use of blogs and bloggers by political elites.

In terms of blog-use by political elites, the U.S. is – as is traditional in (post-)modern campaigning – a trendsetter. Howard Dean, an ex-governor of Vermont, was the first

American politician who very cleverly and strategically used blogs and websites in his campaign for nomination as democratic presidential candidate in 2004[8]. By appropriating a strategic communication model developed by the social movement MoveOn.org, Dean managed to create a campaign dynamic that unexpectedly put him in a position to challenge Al Gore. The MoveOn-strategy consisted of an interactive model of online communication and linking this to fund-raising and offline gatherings or meet-ups (Jacobs, 2005). The presidential campaign of 2004 demonstrated for the first time that the internet could not only be used as an instrument for dissemination of information – independently from mainstream media, but that it could also be extremely valuable as an organisational instrument linking-up disparate activists and sympathisers (Vaccari, 2006). It stands to reason that this example was followed keenly by all candidates in the 2008 US presidential election campaign. Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for the democratic nomination on her website first. Just as almost all other candidates, her biggest rival in the primaries, Barack Obama, not only has his own website and different blog sites, but also a MySpace page, a Facebook page, a YouTube profile and a profile on the micro blogsite, Twitter[9]. This latest Web-2.0 application allows users to send short instant-messages of less than 140 characters to all 'friends'. These messages are not only disseminated online, but also via mobile networks, which could be relevant with a view to instant or alert mobilisation.

Another phenomenon, which is similar to the blogola practices of the media industry, is to involve 'famous' political A-list bloggers in campaigns by granting them an accreditation to follow the campaign, or by simply employing them in the campaign. In doing so established political elites re-enforce the *'hegemony of the amateur'* (Carr, 2005), but at the same time this also elicits profound questions about the credibility and independence of political bloggers. For example, in 2003 the Howard Dean campaign paid two 'reputable' political bloggers (Jerome Armstrong from MyDD and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga from DailyKos) 12.000 US$ each, so-called for consultancy services. However, Zephyr Teachout - the former head of Dean's outreach campaign - claims that they were paid to write positively about the campaign (Bulkeley and Bandler, 2005). The campaign for nomination as the Democrat candidate for the US-senate in 2006 between Connecticut senator Joe Lieberman (Al Gore's former running-mate against Bush Jr. in 2000) and Ned Lamont was also marred by blogola practices. During this campaign, Lieberman was not only sharply criticised locally, but also nationally for his open support of the second Iraqi war. The aggressive online anti-Lieberman campaign was largely based on the use of bloggers and anti-war activists[10]. When Lamont was nominated in 2006 as the candidate for the Democratic Party, Lieberman decided to stand as an independent candidate. Eventually Lieberman was re-elected as senator for Connecticut, which clearly indicates that we should not overestimate the impact of the internet or blogs on politics. In France blogs were also used extensively in the 2007 presidential campaign. Sarkozy appointed Loic Le Meur, one of the most popular political bloggers in France, as his personal adviser on the use of blogs, YouTube and even Second Life in his campaign strategy. [11]

The cases above not only illustrate the increasing symbolic power of blogs, but also that blogs have been fully adopted as a cunning political marketing and propaganda instrument

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[8] See: http://www.deanforamerica.com/, which was later changed to http://www.democracyforamerica.com

[9] website: http://barackobama.com/; blog-sites: http://www.runobama.com/blog/, http://www.barack-obama-now.com/blog/; MySpace: http://www.myspace.com/barackobama; FaceBook: http://www.facebook.com/person.php?id=2355496748; YouTube: http://youtube.com/barackobama en http://twitter.com/

[10] For more on this, see the documentary 'Blog Wars' by James Rogan

[11] See: BBC Online, 2007c ; http://loiclemeur.com/; http://www.sarkozy.fr/home/ and http://www.supportersdesarkozy.com/home

in the hands of political elites to communicate with citizens in an attempt to by-pass the mediation of media-professionals, to reach a younger generation, to recruit and mobilise sympathisers and to generate funds. Moreover, a politician with a blog, seen to be chatting with the citizen, and present on the popular community network sites, shows that s/he is web savvy and 'with-it'. Even though their contributions are mostly written by a copywriter or close aid, the image of a politician is boosted by this and in these times of image sculpting, the post-modern politicians must leave their traces in as many public spaces as possible. The same goes for the cultural elites, such as pop stars, actors and other protagonists of the present day celeb-culture. Furthermore, the concept of elites is also fluid as the blogosphere itself produces new elites who are increasingly being appropriated, co-opted or even bribed by more traditional elites, be it to re-enforce certain viewpoints, to rally in favour of a political candidate or as was mentioned earlier to promote cultural products. As Keen (2007: 79) points out, in the blogosphere *'[w]e're never sure if what we read or see is what it seems'*.

4. Social Control and Online Intimidation

It is, however, not merely the market, governments or employers that limit the democratic and participative potential of the blogosphere. Fellow bloggers or visitors to the blog can also potentially intimidate a blogger, and even force him or her to stop blogging. In this regard can be referred to the phenomenon of 'flame wars' in online forums (Eum, 2005; Cammaerts, 2005: 70; Lee, 2005: 53). Flaming – or the *'intentional (whether successful or unsuccessful) negative violations of (negotiated, evolving, and situated) interactional norms'* (O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003: 84) – occurs when participants to an online forum are humiliated or insulted by other participants to the extent that the row turns into a mud-slinging contest, resulting in debate to completely stop and/or participants to withdraw. In the blogosphere a similar phenomenon can take place, but because the blog, more so than for example an online forum, is situated on the divide between the public and the private, such attacks are often experienced as far more personal and threatening. Ringmar (2007: 55) notes, *'[y]ou cannot think and write freely as long as you are afraid of intimidations.'*

Kim (2007) describes two interesting cases in this regard. In doing so he invokes Noelle-Neumann's (1984) spiral of silence[12], which according to him, amounts to a spiral of invisibility in an online context. Kim gives a voice to two South-Korean bloggers – Sophie and Joyride – both 'victims' of online intimidation campaigns by fellow bloggers. Sophie, a Korean immigrant, mother of two children, living in New York, writes a blog about paintings, immigration, education, and (male) sexuality on the popular South-Korean blog site OhmyNews. In her blog Sophie is very open and also critical of the Korean, and especially male Korean, identity. This was clearly not appreciated by a (nationalistic, male and anti-American) part of the South Korean blog community. As a result she started receiving more and more snide and insulting comments from other bloggers but also from anonymous readers of her blog, causing her sleepless nights, and eventually even making her stop blogging for a while. Sophia then switched to another (non-Korean) blog service in order to avoid the gaze and critiques of fellow Koreans.

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[12] The spiral of silence explains why someone who holds a dissident view, often decides not to speak out rather than air these views in public, for fear of being isolated.

Joyride is the second blogger discussed by Kim (2007). Joyride has a popular blog, and is also a cartoonist. In his postings and cartoons he criticised the narrow-minded South-Korean nationalism, and the deep-seated racism in South-Korea against Japan and the Japanese. His tolerance and openness toward Japanese culture elicited many controversial and negative comments. Because of the personal threats in his e-mail, and the insults directed at his wife, Joyride eventually decided to remove the interactive function on his blog making it impossible for visitors to add comments. After a month he reinstated this function (giving as reason the fact that he missed the positive feedback), but he no longer replied to postings, and the tone of his postings and cartoons also became distinctly milder.

In Belgium, Kelly Deriemaeker (aka Lillith), who writes a blog called *Tales from the Crib*[13], became so popular that she was co-opted by a gossip magazine called Story to re-invigorate the magazine. However, she does acknowledge that the more famous she became the more she self-censored herself. While her visibility gradually increased, she became aware that her neighbours are also reading her blog, so *'a post about their cry-baby that kept me awake all night, is not possible anymore'* (quoted in De Morgen, 2008: 35). At the same time, more visibility also attracts more negative comments from readers. She states that she shouldn't be bothered by or care about such negative comments, but nevertheless *'those comments haunt your mind'* (quoted in De Morgen, 2008: 35).

The case of Lillith, Kim's study, as well as others (O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003; Eum, 2005), indicate that there is an inherent contradiction in the dynamics between the private and the public in relation to blogging. On the one hand visibility is essential, and is actively sought in order to promote the popularity of the blog, but on the other hand this visibility and popularity also leads to an increase possibility of social control and intimidation. Social control thus manifests itself both in the Foucauldian panoptic sense – the few watching the many – as in a synoptic sense – the many watching the few. Both are closely linked, and re-enforce each other, as Lyon (2006: 47) also puts forward.

5. Anti-Publics[14]

The critical tradition within social sciences has a tendency to focus on progressive movements. However, it cannot be ignored that there are many anti-publics active in a democracy, certainly online. These anti-democratic forces openly question deeply rooted democratic values and flirt with the limits of freedom of expression. Contrary to the US, where freedom of expression is almost absolute and constitutionally protected by the First Amendment, European countries have adopted a more ethically inspired delineation between what is protected by freedom of expression and what is not. For example, parliaments in many European countries (but also beyond) have all voted legislation that not only considers incitement of violence, but also the incitement of discrimination or racial hatred as unacceptable within a democracy. The European tradition is thus one that, as Butler (1997: 72) expresses, does not deny *'the action that the speech performs'*, and takes the view that, in the case of incitement of racial hatred or in the case of negationism, no clear distinction can be made between ideas and actions.

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[13] See URL: http://www.talesfromthecrib.be/ (Last consulted on: 20/05/2008)
[14] This is partly based on Cammaerts, 2007

A pertinent example of how controversial this debate is, are the extreme-right blogs and online forums, and the hurtful discourses being produced there. In Belgium the website Cyberhate.be of the Center for Equal Opportunities and the Fight against Racism (CGKR) receives on average about 30 complaints per month (Sofie D'Huster, e-mail interview, 21/05/2007). It is clear that extreme-right movements and activists, as well as individual bloggers, increasingly (ab)use the right to freedom of expression as the ultimate argument to claim their 'democratic' right to be a racist.

In spring of 2006 this phenomenon was boldly demonstrated by the hateful discourses produced by North-Belgian bloggers in the aftermath of the murder of Joe Van Holsbeke in Brussels' central station (12/04) by Polish kids, and the involuntary manslaughter of Guido Demoor on Bus 23 in Antwerp (24/06) by Moroccan youngsters. With reference to the murder of Joe Van Holsbeke, Paul Belien, a Vlaams Belang ideologist, posted a text with the title *'Geef ons Wapens'* ('Give us Weapons'), in which he compares the (then still presumed) Moroccan perpetrators with predators who are taught to kill during the sacrificial feast, and are not afraid of blood. From there on he calls for the taking up of arms by the 'own nation'. With respect to the death of Guido Demoor, Luc Van Balberghe, an extreme-right journalist and publisher, posted the following on his blog, 'Vrij van Zegel': *In Antwerp every respectable white is bursting with (as yet) suppressed anger. Anger at the vermin who think that the city belongs to them. Anger at the utter helplessness, because every person in his right mind has to hold his tongue in cheek and meekly bow before the foreign leeches*. (http://www.vrijvanzegel.net/, 27/06/2006 – author's translation). In both instances the CGKR filed official complaints. Belien removed his posting, and Van Balgerghe amended his considerably. He replaced the words *'ongedierte'* ('vermin') and *'bloedzuigers'* ('leeches') with *'jongeren'* ('youths'), and also removed a controversial allegory about ants needing to be exterminated with DDT.

Online forums also pose particular problems. US-based sites such as Stormfront and Blood&Honour all have sub-sites in different languages, allowing European extreme-right and fascist activists to voice racist language or distribute content relating to Holocaust denial in their own language. Much of what is being posted on these sites is in senso stricto prohibited by the Belgian anti-racist and anti-discrimination legislation (1981/2003), as well as by the law that prohibits negationism (1995). A particularily distasteful example of this were the extremely racist discourses posted on the Stormfront site after the murder in Antwerp's inner city of the Nigerian au-pair Oulematou Niangadou and Luna Drowart, the baby she was minding, by an extreme-right youngster (May 2006). Below some examples in translation of reactions on the Dutch-speaking part of Stormfront[15]:

- *Pfff, this does not keep me awake. I just cannot understand why he also shot the white child.* (Watch Out, 11/05/2006 – own translation)
- *You shot a negro woman, why did you then shoot the baby? While there are enough other blacks in the neighbourhood?* (NSDA-pe, 12/05/2006 – own translation)
- *He could at least have taken a few other Jews with him. Antwerp stinks of Jews.* (Hidrich, Posting on Stormfront, 13/05/2006 – author's translation)

Every right and left-minded citizen cannot but react emotionally when confronted with such 'wounding' words (Matsuda, et al., 1993). However, the internet makes it possible for 'netizens' living in Belgium to claim (certain) rights in the US. As such, the physical

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[15] please accept my apology for the offensive content

location where the site is hosted, determines which legislation applies. Sofie D'Hulster of the CGKR confirms this: *there is no legal procedure in place to silence these website. Even though the website is accessible in different languages, among them also Dutch and French, we are unable to do anything in terms of Belgian legislation.* (email interview, 21/05/2007 – author's translation)

This raises many questions for which there are no easy answers. Questions such as: Does it make sense to ban such anti-publics from the public sphere? European governments could easily decide to install a filter system, blocking access from Europe to sites such as Stormfront, but the real question is whether this serves any purpose? First, as the list of countries that filter the internet showed, that is not particularly a club you would want to belong to as a democratic country. Furthermore, who will ultimately decide which sites to block, and what guarantees are there to prevent that other radical and alternative voices in society to be censored as well in future? In the end, it all boils down to the queston whether a democracy and the democratic values of equality, solidarity and respect for others' views it embodies, should/can/needs to defend itself against anti-democratic forces aimed at destroying democracy from within (see Popper, 1965: 265). In this regard, even Mouffe (2005: 120), an advocate of a radical and conflictual pluralism of ideas and movements in society, states that *'[a] democracy cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries.'* However, the question remains whether (online) censorship is the right strategy to combat this? Butler (1997) seems to disagree and warns us that the removal of certain discourses and idea's from the public space does not mean that these ideas have disappeared. She even suggests that this might paradoxically strengthen those views.

6. Conclusion

This critical overview shows that the image of the blogosphere as a deliberative space, as a model for an online (Habermassian) public sphere where every person is free to air his or her views, thus making rational dialogue between equal status-free participants in public debates possible, is somewhat problematic to say the least. Nevertheless, Habermas' historical inquiry is still relevant in relation to the re-feudalisation of open spaces for debate by commcercial forces, state actors and established elites. In this overview five phenomena which undermine the participatory character of the internet and blogs were identified. Three of these can be situated at the structural – organisational – level: the tensions which the commodification of the internet and the blogosphere bring about, the censorship of blogs and intimidation of bloggers by states and employers, and the appropriation of the blogosphere by elites as a marketing instrument. A further two are mostly situated at the level of the individual or citizen: online intimidation by fellow bloggers inducing self-censorship, and the existence of anti-publics, abusing the freedom of expression with the aim to weaken democracy and democratic values.

New technologies always come with high expectations and strong claims about its potentials to foster democracy and emancipation. This was the case with radio, television, video and also with the internet. While technologies are never neutral, they are – as Carr (2005) points out – amoral. Humans design technologies and use them for a variety of purposes, which can be both beneficial as well as detrimental to democracy. As such the internet is a medium rife with contradictions. While the internet is one of the drivers of the

present hyper-capitalist economic system, it also makes resistance possible, as is demonstrated by among others Indymedia or other activist media.

Another noticeable contradiction is the ever more porous and fluid boundaries between what is considered to be private and public. The convergence of different types of communication – characterised before as one-to-one (the telephone), one-to-many (television or radio), and more recently many-to-many (peer-to-peer application or Wikis) – makes privacy a contentious issue. As a result communication initially intended as private or directed at a limited social network can suddenly become extremely public. As Coleman (2005: 277) observes, a blog *'provides a bridge between the private, subjective sphere of self-expression and the socially fragile civic sphere in which publics can form and act'*. Blogs and social network sites are thus situated in that twilight zone between the private and the public, and as a result produsers make themselves vulnerable in terms of repressive states, as well as their present and future employers. At the same time, some bloggers purposely attempt to maximise their publicity, thereby placing themselves openly in the public space.

As pointed out earlier, it is not only capitalism, states, employers or established elites that erode the participative and democratic potentials of the internet. Two examples of disruptive online tactics by citizens were also provided: online intimidation by fellow bloggers, and the use of offensive wounding language by anti-publics. In relation to the former victims of intimidation campaigns may stop 'talking' altogether, de-activate the interactive function of their blogs, or start practicing self-censorship. In the second instance, whole groups in society may be insulted or denigrated, and as a result racist discourses and ideologies may become normalised in society.

The purpose of this critical assessment of the participatory potential of blogs was to tone down the often-celebratory enthusiasm displayed by many authors regarding the participatory potentials of the internet and the blogosphere in particular. The internet cannot be treated as a separate entity from the economic, political and cultural realities of the offline world; it forms an integral part thereof. In this regard, O'Neil (2005: 4) asks a provocative, but relevant question: *'if social networks have migrated online, is it not logical to assume that the processes of differentiation, hierarchisation and control which, by all accounts, structure offline human interactions, have also done so?'*. The overview in this article seems to suggest the answer to this question is an unequivocal yes.

This does, however, not mean that these potentials have to be denied all together, or reduced to a marginal insignificant status, on the contrary. In this regard, the many resistance practices against the commodification of information and culture, can be mentioned. But it remains important to acknowledge that there are also actors and phenomena at work stifling, reducing or limiting these potentialities. This is why the image of agonistic and even antagonistic public spaces (Mouffe, 1999), which are inherently conflictual and where (productive) power is constitutive of the political, is more relevant to make sense of the online environment then the Habermassian consensual public sphere, implied by the notion blogosphere.

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