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Online Political Debate, Unbounded Citizenship and the Problematic Nature of a Transnational Public Sphere

Bart Cammaerts & Leo Van Audenhoveⁱ

ABSTRACT:

Citizenship has always been a dynamic notion, subject to change and permanent struggle over its precise content and meaning. Recent technological, economic and political transformations have led to the development of alternative notions of citizenship that go beyond the classic understanding of citizenship relating to nation states and rights. Civil society actors play an important role in this process by organising themselves at a transnational level, engaging with issues that transcend the boundaries of the nation state and questioning the democratic legitimacy of other transnational actors such as international organisations or the corporate sector. They also allow citizens to engage with such 'unbounded' issues and attempt to construct a transnational public sphere where such issues can be debated. It is often assumed that the Internet plays a crucial role in enabling this transnational public sphere to take shape. Empirical analysis of discussion forums and mailing-lists developed by transnational civil society actors shows however that the construction of such a transnational public sphere is burdened with many constraints. To speak of a unified transnational public sphere is therefore deemed to be problematic. In this regard it was also concluded that the transnational cannot be seen or construed without taking into account the local, the national and enforceable rights in order to materialise the ideas and hopes being voiced through civil society.

KEYWORDS:

Citizenship, Transnational Civil Society, Public Sphere, Interactive Forums, Debate

Introduction

Citizenship has always been a highly or *essentially contested notion*, implying that meaning, scope and nature is perpetually being debated and struggled over. Historically it has proven to be a highly dynamic concept, evolving from for example the fight for equal political rights for all, over the struggles of labour versus capital to demands for equality by women, gays, lesbians, ethnical minorities, etc. In recent years citizenship and the transformation thereof has resulted in a fierce academic debate—opposing authors who stick to the classic definition of citizenship and those who claim that citizenship has transformed due to processes of globalisation, transnationalisation and the interactive potentials of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The former stick to the nation-state as the prime and

indeed only realm where citizenship can take form. The latter defend that new forms of ‘unbound’ citizenship are emerging, linked to cosmopolitanism, multiple identities and embedded in a transnational civil society. They point towards (new) levels of political participation ‘below’ and ‘above’ the nation state, emerging communities of interest that go beyond the confinements or boundaries of the nation state and beyond mere rights. ICTs are said to play an enabling role in this regard.

The aim of this article is to assess to what extent the Internet and its use by transnational civil society organisations contributes to the emergence of unbounded notions of citizenship. The current debate concerning citizenship is—and probably will always be—to a certain extent normative by nature, but it has also been situated mostly at a theoretical level of analysis and is rarely substantiated by systematic empirical research. In this article we will look at the issue of an emerging transnational public sphere and online participation. The empirical results rely on the extensive research that has been carried out in the framework of two interrelated projects (cf. Van Audenhove, et.al., 2002; Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2003). First, we will however give a short overview of the theories with regard to bounded nation-state citizenship and unbounded notions of citizenship recently being developed.

Bounded & Unbounded Notions of Citizenship

Before looking at the ‘unbounded’ notions of citizenship, as well as its links to civil society and ICTs, it is useful to look at what this classic nation state notion of citizenship entails.

Historically speaking citizenship was of course born in ancient Greece, where citizens, the ‘official’ and registered inhabitants of the city, were given certain rights that ‘the others’—non-citizens, foreigners, slaves, etc.—did not enjoy. It was a way of structuring society, of enforcing boundaries that allowed the city-state to include, but above all to exclude. After the treaty of Westphalia (Münster) in 1648 the nation state became the sovereign territory from which citizenship was delineated.

Modern citizenship has however evolved considerably since the Greek city-states or indeed the formation and consolidation of the nation states. Today it is considered to be very much a product of Western Enlightenment and Modernism, closely linked to the class struggle, as is shown in T.H. Marshall’s classic book *‘Citizenship and Social Class’*. As such Marshall (1950: 10-11) defined citizenship in terms of the struggles for civic, political, as well as social rights:

“The civil element is composed of the rights necessary for personal freedom (...) By the political element I mean the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political power or as an elector of such a body. (...) By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society.”

Other authors have refined and/or criticised the Marshallian conceptualisation of citizenship by introducing the welfare state as the realm where citizenship materialises in Modern societies or by introducing feminist and ethnic minority perspectives (O’Conner, 1973: 6; Esping-Andersen, 1990: 21; Lister, 1997; Ginsburg, 1994). In the 1980s and 1990s the

emphasis within citizenship-studies shifted from ‘rights’ to also include ‘obligations’, such as paying taxes, voting, or being part of a jury (Galston, 1991; Etzioni, 1993: 5; Janoski, 1998).

But, these criticisms do not question the firm link between the citizenship-notion and the nation/welfare state. Citizenship is clearly developed and conceptualised within the ‘boundaries’ of the modernist nation state:

“All our experience of citizenship (...) has so far been of bounded citizenship: initially citizenship within the walls of the city state, later citizenship within the cultural limits of the nation-state. These boundaries have been actively policed. Admission to citizenship has always come with strings attached” (Miller, 1999: 69)

However, increased globalisation of the world economy, revolutionary innovations in communication, transport and mobility, ecological and demographic pressures, as well as ethnic and nationalistic forces have considerably undermined the sovereignty and legitimacy of the nation state, core of the bounded notions of citizenship (Rosso, 1995; Castells, 1996; Held, et al., 1999). In parallel with these socio-economic, as well as political, transformations ‘new’ actors emerged with whom States have to share power at the international level of governance, and on which most nation states have a much more limited impact (Rosenau, 1990). Besides the regional entities, such as the EU, multi- or transnational corporations, international organisation and civil society actors are definitely playing a more active role and have above all gained genuine or relative—soft—degrees of power vis-à-vis the nation states. Examples of this are delocalisation strategies adopted by private sector actors, free trade regimes enforced by the IMF and the WTO, budgetary criteria in view of a single European currency, campaigns by NGOs concerning human rights or ecological issues, etc. Due to these social, economic and political transformations it is fair to state that the Westphalian nation state, as a sovereign state linked to a geographical territory with material, economical, social, physical and psychological independence from other States and actors, is no more.

Broadly speaking five evolutions can be identified as having a profound impact on the notion of (bounded) citizenship.

First of all, welfare state rights linked to social citizenship are more and more put under pressure. Full employment is no longer a tenable aim, social security systems are difficult to sustain due to budgetary constraints combined with demographic shifts and solidarity is being questioned by individualistic consumerism. In terms of political citizenship this has contributed to an existentialist crisis of (formal) representative democracy. This crisis is exemplified amongst others by low voter turnout at elections, declining membership of political parties and old social movements and an increasing number of protest votes for populist or even neo-fascist parties. (Hall & Jacques, 1989; Galbraith, 1992; Giddens, 1994; Fitoussi & Rosanvallon, 1996; Haque, 1996)

Secondly, the notion of 'bounded' citizenship has also been seriously affected by what has been called a time-space compression. The time-space dimension has changed dramatically in the last 30 years. Several factors have played a role in this. Increased mobility in general has led to more people travelling and becoming more aware of what is going on beyond the confinements or boundaries of their own town, city, and nation state. Besides this, ICTs have resulted in uninterrupted world-wide real-time communicative streams, essentially eliminating time/space restrictions in terms of communication. The compression of time/space barriers has furthermore led to a dual move with regard to borders and boundaries. We are witnessing a blurring of boundaries, for example in terms of the difficulty to control content or the emergence of transnational communities of interest, but at the same time also a re-enforcement of boundaries, cf. 'Fortress Europe' or privacy issues. This dual process relates as much to geographical borders, as to symbolic boundaries, cf. private vs. public sphere. (Habermas, et al., 1996; Harvey, 1989; Lash & Urry, 1994; Burgelman, 2000)

Thirdly, linked to mobility, increased migration has also changed the nature and content of bounded citizenship. Some migrants might benefit from some citizenship rights, while at the same time being excluded from others. Legal migrants will for example pay taxes and have some degree of social citizenship, but no right to vote, thus no political citizenship. Illegal migrants can sometimes benefit from basic health care or send their children to school, but will not be able to work officially or to own property, let alone vote. Furthermore, second and/or third generation migrants—even when having adopted ‘local’ or dual nationality—are also often engaged in transnational diasporic networks and multiple allegiances beyond the nation state. (Soysal, 1994; Benhabib, 1996; Sassen, 2002; Georgiou, 2003)

Fourthly, political participation—or rather the perception of what it means to be politically active as a citizen—is being reshaped considerably. Many citizens see direct action, their activism within or support to social movement organisations as being much more satisfying and politically effective than being a member of an hierarchical (national) political party. Civic engagement has in other words largely shifted from the formal democratic level towards a meso-level of participation, in between the formal political level and the unorganised citizen. This can be explained in part by the fact that engagement and involvement is much less defined in terms of ideology and the formal (national) representative political process. Also, the big structural and emancipatory issues are no longer the sole triggers for engagement, but rather issues closer to home (below the national), single-issues (animal rights, ecology, child abuse, clean clothes, etc), issues that relate to what has also been called identity- or life-politics. Besides this, it also has to be acknowledged that many citizens perceive the nation state as being powerless with regard to most of the above mentioned ‘issues’ they want to see addressed. (Giddens, 1991; Bennett, 1998; Beck, 1994)

Lastly, the power-shift from the nation states towards regional/global political or indeed economic institutions and the lack or rather weak democratic control on these ‘higher’ levels

of governance, have prompted civil society organisations—and more specifically social movement organisations—to organise themselves beyond the nation states in order to critically question the legitimacy of international economic and political actors. Transnational social movements allow citizens to link up with a community of interest and action beyond their own nation state. As such, transnational social movements are being perceived as the result of ‘globalisation from below’, counterbalancing the globalising economic, political and cultural spheres, which increasingly escape the sovereignty of the nation state. (Colas, 1997; Florini, 2000; Guidry et al., 2000; Anheier et al., 2001)

These evolutions have resulted in the formulation of several ‘unbounded’ notions of citizenship, such as ecological citizenship, net.citizenship, transnational citizenship, cosmopolitan citizenship or denationalised citizenship (van Steenberg, 1994; Bauböck, 1994; Hauben, 1995; Linklater, 1999; Sassen, 2002). Without going too much into the conceptual differences between these alternative notions of citizenship, they are all similar in that they point to the distinctiveness, but also (possibly conflictuous) co-existence of, or even tensions between, on the one hand the citizen as a legal subject, linked to welfare state rights and to *communities of birth*, and on the other hand the citizen as a normative subject, linked to social, sexual or cultural identities and action, to *communities of interest* (Giddens, 1991; Frissen & van Bockxmeer, 2001).

This latter perspective allows for the conceptualisation of citizenship-notions that go beyond the nation state, but also to a certain extent beyond the personal, beyond the individual ‘rights’ focus that is inherent to formal legal citizenship (cf. ecology, third world issues, etc.). As Mouffe (1992: 231) states, citizenship thus becomes a “*form of identification, a type of political identity; something to be constructed, not empirically given*”. These ‘unbounded’ notions of citizenship also reflect an ethical stance of the moral that gets translated into the

political, of a belief in change, agency and the transformity of democracy. It points to an idealised citizenship and to a certain extent to the impossibility of full—completed—citizenship (Enwezor, et al., 2002). Problematic in this regard is however that dominant theories with regard to citizenship, civil society and public sphere are still very much embedded in a national ‘bounded’ context.

Transnational Civil Society, an Unbounded Public Sphere & the Internet

Although there are clear conceptual differences between citizenship and civil society, most scholars recognise that the public sphere and the emergence of a transnational civil society is crucial to the construction of bounded, as well as unbounded notions of citizenship. They are intrinsically linked to each other. Historically civil society, as a part of the public sphere, has produced the very ideas of citizenship, as well as the groups and pressures in order to materialise these ideas (Janoski, 1998: 17).

When looking at unbounded notions of citizenship civil society plays an even bigger role than within the classical definition of nation state citizenship. This can be partly explained by the obvious link between ideas of unbounded citizenship and the emergence of global or rather transnational communities of discourse developed by a plurality of (transnational) social movement organisations (Mouffe, 1992). Besides this, the lack of formal democratic control at the international level of governance makes that many issues linked to unbounded citizenship—such as ecology, global social justice or debt relief for developing countries—require solutions that transcend the national context.

Media and communication have always played an important mediating role in this regard. As Urry (1999: 318) rightly states: “*Citizenship has always necessitated symbolic resources distributed through various means of mass communication*”. The Internet is one of these various means of communication that potentially facilitate the development of unbounded ideas of citizenship and play an enabling role in organising the struggles for the issues that emerge from this. However, the Internet plays an intriguingly schizophrenic role within these complex socio-political evolutions (Norris, 2001; Bimber, 2000; DiMaggio, et al., 2001). The Internet could be seen as inclusive in that it facilitates the organisation of civil society actors, enables new—less formalised—forms of civic engagement beyond membership, and could

also be seen as potentially extending the public sphere beyond the national. But, these technologies are also exclusive in the sense that access is far from universal, nor are the capabilities and means evenly distributed to allow the 'global' citizen to use and operate these communication-tools efficiently and effectively (Lazarus & Lora, 2000; O'Donnel, 2001).

Scott & Street (2001: 46) enumerate 4 broad reasons why the Internet is attractive for social movements:

1. *“the Internet allows for mesomobilisation — co-ordination between movements’ networks across borders and without the need for a transcending hierarchical organisational form;*
2. *the Internet allows for a high impact without needing major resources;*
3. *the Internet allows the organisations to retain editorial control over content and external communication;*
4. *the Internet allows for organisations to bypass state control and communicate in a secure environment.”*

Besides the reasons put forward by Scott & Street, the Internet is also deemed to play an increasingly important role in relation to strengthening the public sphere through the mediation of (political) debate (Dahlgren, 2000; Dahlberg, 2001; Bennett, 2003). From a participatory perspective the Internet is not seen by these authors as a technological wonder by which (representative) democracy will be saved, or as producing more/better participation, but rather as an opportunity-structure—opening-up potentialities and opportunities—in the realm of informal political processes and social movement organisation. Broadly speaking, ICTs are relevant and important for social movements in three ways; as a tool to organise social movement organisations at a national and above all transnational level, as a tool to mobilise, online as well as offline, and as a tool to enable the mediation of interactive discussion and debate and thereby potentially contributing to an emerging transnational public sphere. The latter should be understood as an open space where conflicting discourses about transnational issues are being developed and debated (Curran, 1994).

The question that will be addressed in this article is whether there is empirical evidence that can substantiate this emergence of a transnational public sphere mediated through the Internet. In order to do so we will draw upon two related research-projectsⁱⁱ using case studies, online content analysis and in-depth interviews. Three cases of transnational civil society actors have been withheld; LabourStart, ATTAC and Indymedia. First we will introduce the three cases and shortly assess the degree of transnationalisation of the three organisations to then look at the ways in which these organisations try to foster interactive engagement and debate by citizens by using their sites. Regarding the latter we will look at three parameters;

1. The variety of participants in terms of their nationality or country of origin
2. The transnational character of issues being discussed
3. The degree and nature of debate or interaction between participants

This will allow us to say something about the use of the Internet by these organisations and citizens in terms of discussing transnational issues and the potential for constructing a transnational 'unbounded' public sphere.

Three cases of transnational civil society organisations

<http://www.LabourStart.org/>

The LabourStart-page can be considered as a very dynamic portal site towards Labour related news and the international labour movement. It was originally developed by Eric Lee and is supported by Labour and Society International, an independent organisation that aims: *"to link the trade union movement with other parts of civil society and to help unions to develop a wider agenda."* The case of LabourStart proves that the Internet allows for widespread transnational activity with little or no resources. LabourStart, although based in London, is also transnationally organised. Using a user-friendly tool to upload articles and links resulted in a low threshold for correspondents to update local and international labour news. LabourStart exists in 9 languages and is being fed by almost 150 correspondents located in some 30 countries (cf. Fig.1). Correspondents also communicate with each other through e-mail and a mailinglist. This exchange of labour related information from across the world works very well.

Geographical Spreading of LabourStart

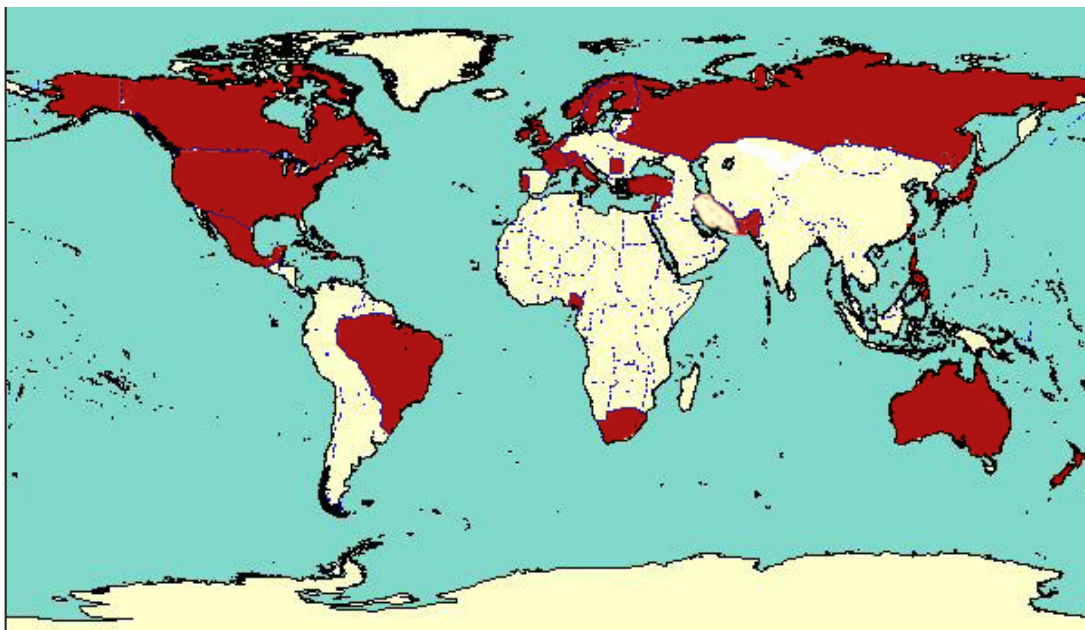


Fig.1

Overall LabourStart can be regarded as having a very strong transnational basis, as it is present in all continents and even more importantly offers content from all continents in different languages. At the organisational level it shows a strong degree of transnationalisation as the site and its content is being maintained and updated daily by a collective of correspondents.

<http://www.attac.org>

At first ATTAC, what stands for ‘Action pour une taxe Tobin d'aide aux citoyens’, pleaded for the introduction of a Tobin-tax to counter speculation and re-regulate the financial markets. But in the meantime ATTAC also pursues the much broader goal of altering the dominant global neo-liberal economic framework. ATTAC could be described as a transnational coalition of local entities acting upon a common agenda and developing alternative discourses. The local cells of ATTAC are totally decentralised and often have their own structures, procedures and to a certain extent also an own agenda. Among its international activities are the co-organisation of international meetings where citizens, NGOs, social movements, trade unions and associations can link up and develop strategies for action and social change. ATTAC has branches in 48 countries and has a web-presence in 33 countries (cf. Fig.2). However, major differences exist between local branches resulting in substantial differences in resources, volunteers and popular support. The transnational level serves more as a common frame of reference and less as an organisational structure.

Geographical Spreading of ATTAC

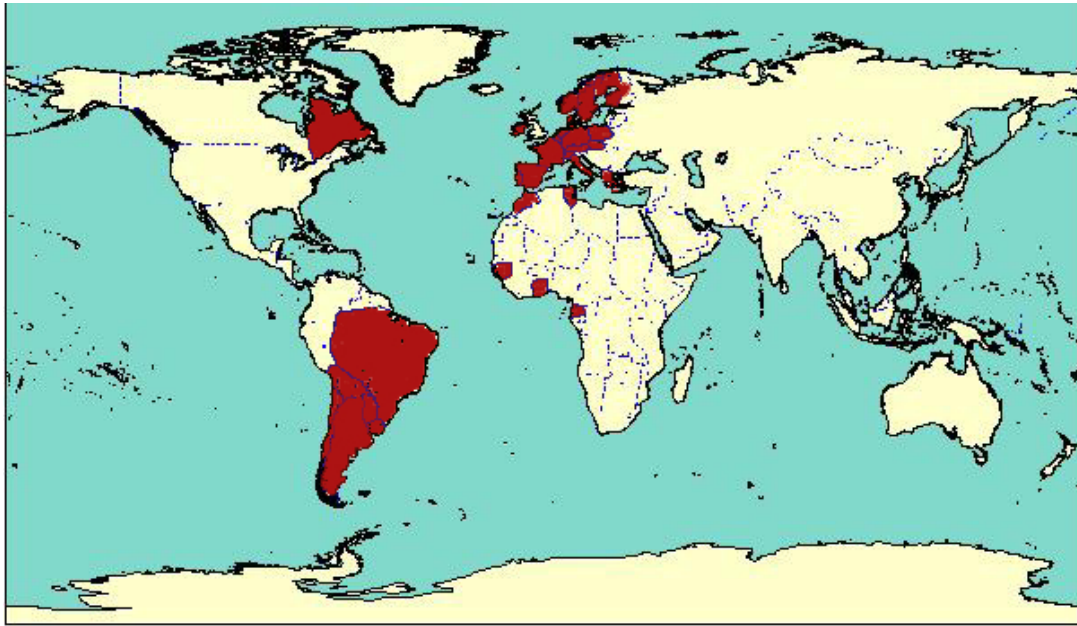


Fig.2

From a geographical perspective the transnationalisation of ATTAC can be qualified as rather medium, because it is mainly focussed on Europe and Latin-America. In cultural terms transnationalisation is rather weak as it is embedded in the 'Roman' cultural sphere. As such a certain degree of 'boundedness' can be observed.

<http://www.indymedia.org/>

Indymedia is a world-wide network of independent media organisations through which several hundred dedicated journalists cover grassroots activities and actions and thereby distancing themselves explicitly from corporate interests. Although supported by organisations in civil society, Indymedia is largely a virtual platform bringing together both individuals (activists) and organisations. By way of using new technologies it provides an alternative and organic public space that also functions as a space for steering and promoting civic action. Indymedia is active in over 40 countries and combines a global view with news on local actions (cf. Fig.3).

Geographical Spreading of Indymedia

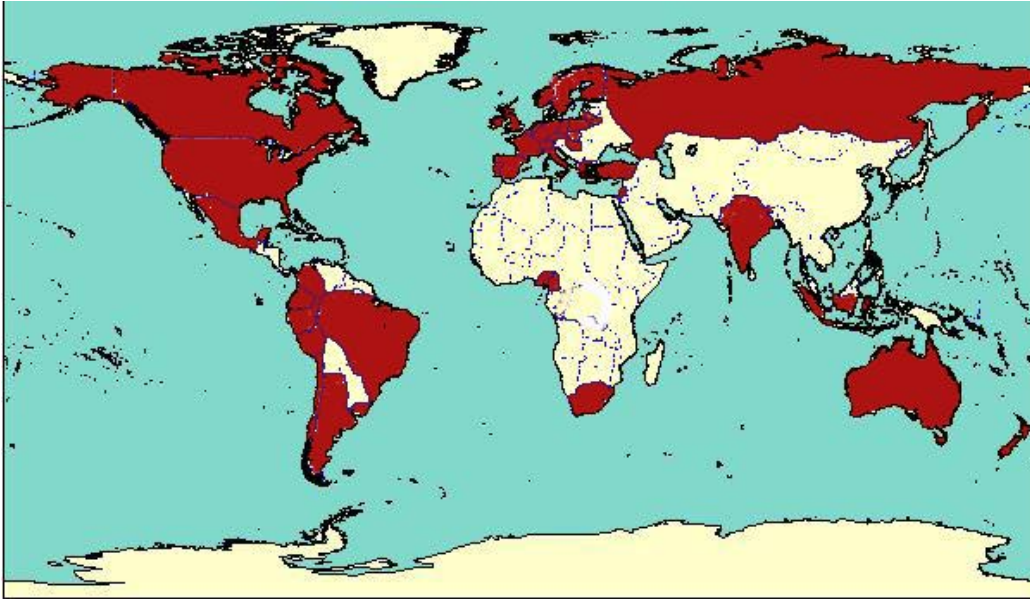


Fig.3

Indymedia can be characterised as a transnational coalition of independent local initiatives with a common aim to provide alternative news and support direct actions. The emphasis does however lie on the local organisation and reporting on local struggles, embedded in and/or linked to similar struggles at an international or regional level. As such, the geographical spread of Indymedia is rather strong, as they are present in all continents. The cultural spread on the other hand can be qualified as medium, as Indymedia is still to a large degree dominated by the Anglo-Saxon culture.

Interactive Engagement and a transnational public Sphere

In this section the emphasis lies on the role of ICT in terms of mediating participation, civic engagement and of extending the public sphere. The assumption is often made that the Internet facilitates new forms of interactive engagement by (global) citizens, such as public forums and discussion-mailinglists, allowing for a transnational public sphere to thrive. Three examples of such interactive spaces have been analysed and will be assessed in terms of the variety of participants, the variety of issues, the degree/quality of debate and their relevance for an emerging unbounded transnational public sphere.

LabourStart has semi-public forums. Everybody can read the forums, but in order to participate you have to go through a registering process. One example was the forum 'Terror and the War on Terror: An Open Discussion Forum for Trade Unionists'. ATTAC uses mailinglists a lot, for internal organisation, but also as a discussion-platform. Several local branches have discussion mailinglists, where members and non-members can discuss current issues. An example of this is the discussion mailinglist of ATTAC-Belgium. Lastly, one might say that almost each article published by Indymedia could potentially develop into a forum, as it is possible to react to the posting, as well as to reactions of others. An example of such a spontaneous forum related to the murder of Pim Fortuyn, a populist political leader in the Netherlands.

Terror and the War on Terror: An Open Discussion Forum for Trade Unionists

The LabourStart Webforum had at the time of analysis some 1400 registered users. Of the in total 35 forums, only 9 had more than 50 postings and 15 more than 20 postings. It is fair to say that most forums are not used at all. There are however a few exceptions. The forum '*Terror and the War on Terror*' is an example of such a 'popular' forum created by LabourStart itself. Of the 454 postings made by some 40 participants, 212 were actual contributions, the other 242 postings were reactions to these contributions. This LabourStart-forum was analysed during a period of 3 monthsⁱⁱⁱ.

Variety of Participants

It is not evident to trace down the nationality of participants within a webforum without infringing their privacy. Sometimes participants will make themselves known by stating their address or some participants will also reveal their nationality in their contribution, but most participants are only known by nickname. Through the IP-addresses, which are made public on the webforum, it is however possible to pinpoint the location from which the posting has been sent. As such it was possible reveal that contributions originated from 6 countries, the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia and finally India (see Tab.1). The number of participants from those countries differs and as such it is fair to state that the majority of participants come from the UK and the US. Some participants from other countries have however been very active in posting contributions. In so far that it is possible to determine, almost all participants to the forum appear to be male.

Country where participants reside

Country of Origin	# Participants	# Postings
Australia	4	7
Canada	5	87
India	1	1
Netherlands	2	32
UK	12	28
US	17	57
	41	212

Tab.1

The language being used in the forum is English and this in itself excludes in some way participants whose main or second language is French or Spanish. Besides this, the country of origin does not tell the whole story. Although most contributions can be regarded as coming from an—albeit critical—UK or US-perspective, also cross-posted contributions from or on unions in Pakistan, Egypt and Brazil were included. The forum thus bares some degree of internationalism, which has always been present within the labour movement, but nevertheless contributions come mainly from participants located in the Western Hemisphere.

Transnational Character of Issues

The forum offered a lively and often interesting debate about the deeper origins of terrorism, the case for and against war in Afghanistan, US and UK policies in that regard and the position of the (international) Labour-movement on these issues. The transnational character of issues could be described as rather medium as the content of the online-forum focussed both on issues linked to a local/national context, such as the US-, as well as UK-, stance and war-efforts, and more transnational issues such as the socio-economic and geo-political reasons that make terrorist activity flourish.

Degree and Quality of Debate

The forum was fairly active at a certain moment with some 30 postings per week. However, as public and media attention for Afghanistan waned, so did the activity in the forum (Fig.4).

of contributions to the LS-Forum on 'War against Terror'

From 11/11/2001 to 19/02/2002

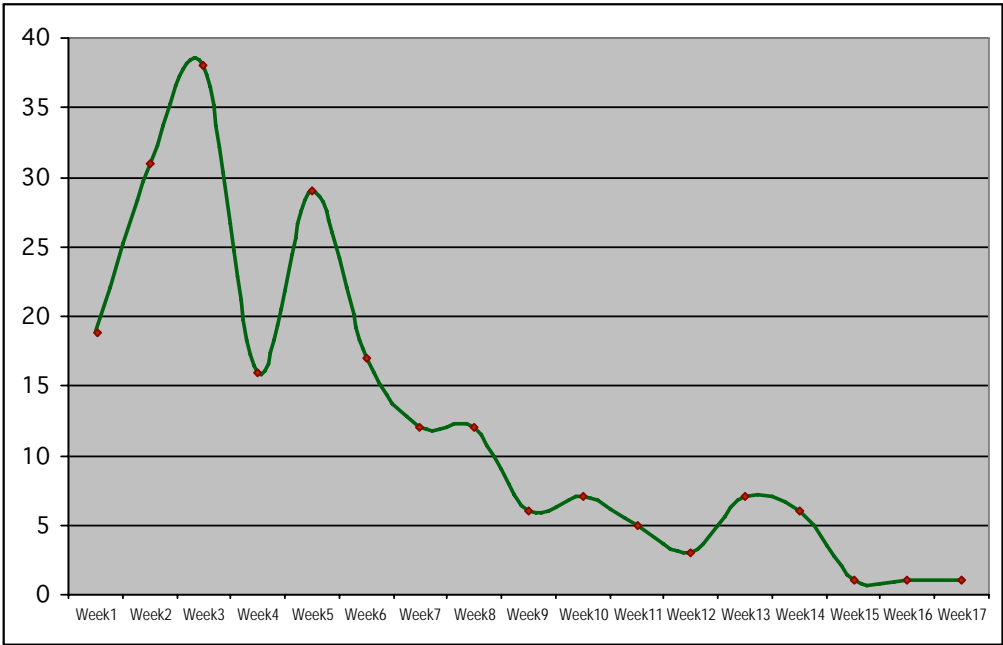


Fig.4

Besides this, it has to be noted that only a small group of participants really engage in discussions with each other, about 40 people posted contributions and some 70% of the posted contributions (reactions not counted) came from 5 very active members of the forum. The same phenomenon can be seen in other LabourStart-forums that are actually being used. Furthermore, not all postings can be described as real engagement between participants. Only 30% of postings relate directly to a debate between participants within the forum. Other messages are postings of relevant information from mainstream press outlets (35%), press releases from organisations such as RAWA (5%) and opinions reproduced from critical authors/journalists such as Robert Fisk, Noam Chomsky, John Pilger or Leo Panitch (28%). Debate is however also often induced by these reproduced opinion articles. Moreover, many contributions generated reactions from other members of the forum, which amounted to more than half of the postings.

Type of messages posted by participants

Type of Message	#	%
Information	73	35
Press-Releases	10	5
Mobilisation	3	1
Opinion-formation	60	28
Debate	66	31
	212	100

Tab.2

In terms of the nature of the debate most contributions can be described as critical of the war on terrorism, although some participants argued that it was justified to remove the Taliban-regime due to its cruelty towards women and less or non-fundamentalist groups in Afghan society. Overall, the discussions could be qualified as being of a high level. Confrontations and arguments were sometimes heated, but never derailed into flaming. This latter observation refers to a common ideological framework from which most participants develop their opinions. It was also apparent that most participants are also politically active in the ‘real’ world.

Contribution to a transnational public sphere

The analysis of this discussion forum revealed the cyclical and fluid character of interactive online engagement. To some extent it can be concluded that this LabourStart-forum can be characterised as an unbounded interactive space for debate, allowing for the confrontation of different perspectives, but this is shaded by two important observations. Firstly, participants are mostly located in the Western Hemisphere. Secondly, debate is relatively low and led by a rather limited number of people—or should we say ‘male opinion makers’? Furthermore, those who do engage with each other are to a large extent likeminded.

Discussion mailinglist of ATTAC-Belgium

In order to subscribe to one of the many mailinglists of ATTAC, one has to register with an e-mail address. On some mailinglists you are asked to present yourself, others are more open. The discussion mailinglist of ATTAC-Belgium was analysed during a period of 3 months^{iv}. In that period 410 messages were posted by 40 active members. About the same number of subscribers (46) is however ‘passive’.

Variety of Participants

The format of the discussion-mailinglists makes it much easier to determine where the (active) participants are coming from, as their e-mail addresses are public. The participants are also mostly sympathisers of (French-speaking) ATTAC-Belgium and thus embedded in a local context. This also reflects itself in the e-mail addresses of the participants, mostly having the extension .be (cf. Tab.3). Besides this a distinction can be made between participants connected through commercial providers (.be, .ch & .com), academics (.ac.be), participants from ATTAC itself, as well as other civil society actors (.org) and surprisingly some—very active—participants from EU-institutions such as the European Council or Parliament.

Extension of participants e-mail addresses

Extension	#Participants	# of Postings
.be	15	194
.ac.be	6	46
.com	5	23
.net	1	8
.org	5	32
.ch	1	4
.eu.int	7	103
	40	410

Tab. 3

Most active participants are male and the dominant language is French, but also messages in Dutch are being posted. Who the passive subscribers—or so-called lurkers—of this discussion mailinglist are and what they do with the messages they receive is in a sense a blind spot, requiring additional research. Some might trash them or read selectively, others might forward some messages to their own networks or even to other mailinglists.

Transnational Character of Issues

Content-wise postings were coded by type and also by issue (cf. Tab.4). The issues being raised by the members of the mailinglist are very diverse and can mostly be related to ‘unbounded’ issues. They are heavily influenced by what happens in ‘the world’, although very little is being said about Africa and Asia. Most favourite topic during the period of analysis was definitely the conflict between Palestine and Israel, which led to heated debates and outspoken opinions. Following far behind are topics that ATTAC also raises as an organisation, such as criticising the EU and mobilising for protests against the EU Summits, questioning globalisation and the neo-liberal free-trade agenda, fiscal fraud and the fight against extreme-right and fascist movements^v. Other topics were: ATTAC itself, protecting public services, police or state repression of demonstrations, events in Latin-America^{vi} and protesting against the policies of the USA and above all against its war against terrorism. Local issues were not being addressed very often. It can therefore be concluded that the transnational character of the issues is rather high.

Number of postings subdivided by issue and type of message

Issues:	#	Type of Message:				
		information	(net)action	activity	debate	opinion
Palestine/Israel	124	38	29	-	47	10
Globalisation	33	7	2	3	9	12
EU + Summits	32	19	3	-	8	2
Anti-Fascism	27	10	7	-	4	6
Latin-America	26	9	6	6	1	4
ATTAC	24	11	-	4	6	3
ICTs/privacy	17	5	2	1	9	-
USA/War on Terror	17	5	4	-	3	5
Repression	16	2	2	-	12	-
Assylumseekers	11	2	8	-	-	1
Free Trade	10	4	3	-	2	1
Fiscal Fraud	9	6	-	-	1	2
Iraq	9	3	-	-	6	-
Local politics	9	3	-	1	5	-
Public Services	9	2	4	-	1	2
Syndicalism	9	3	2	4	-	-
Cuba	7	4	-	-	3	-
Ecology	4	4	-	-	-	-
Peace	4	1	3	-	-	-
Social Forum	3	2	-	1	-	-
Squatting	3	-	1	2	-	-
Tobin	3	3	-	-	-	-
Italy	2	2	-	-	-	-
France	1	1	-	-	-	-
NGOs	1	-	-	-	-	1
TOTAL	410	146	76	22	117	49
%	100%	35%	19%	5%	29%	12%

Tab.4

Degree and Nature of Debate

Of the more than 400 messages only a third can be attributed to real discussion and debate among the members of the list (cf. Tab.4). As was the case in the LabourStart-forum the category opinion—more than 10% of messages—can also partially be related to an interactive use in that it nourishes debate by provoking reactions and comments. The high amount of messages relating to mobilisation (for local actions or for a local activity) is also noteworthy (about 25%). The third big category relates of course to the diffusion of alternative as well as mainstream information (35%). Table 4 also gives us an idea on which subjects most discussion has taken place; the conflict between Israel and Palestine, globalisation, the repression of police forces and privacy. In other words, it is fair to state that discussion between participants on the mailinglist only occurs with regard to a limited number of issues.

Debate itself is however rather sterile, as it often only takes place between a limited number of very active members of the list and as was the case with the LabourStart-forum it is also located within an ideologically homogeneous framework of reference. Nevertheless, points of view, especially with regard to the Middle East conflict, were sometimes opposed, but flaming did not occur.

Contribution to a Transnational Public Sphere

The discussion-mailinglist of ATTAC-Belgium is embedded in a local (mostly French-speaking) context. Its extensive use in terms of mobilisation for local actions and activities illustrates this. Most participants are also clearly active on a local/national level, with the exception of EU-civil servant participants. The issues being addressed are very diverse and relate foremost to notions of unbounded citizenship going beyond the confinements of the local and national setting. However, as was the case within the LabourStart-forum debate is rather limited, both in terms of the issues being discussed and the number of participants really engaging with each other.

The Spontaneous Pim Fortuyn Forum on Indymedia.nl website

In many ways the Indymedia case is different from the previous cases. The websites of Indymedia are based on the ‘bottom up’-principle, only slightly moderated by a small volunteer staff that works mainly ‘behind the screen’, taking care of the technical infrastructure and layout of the website. Therefore, the heart or identity of Indymedia consists in the totality of contributions made by virtually anyone. This way of integrating interactivity within an alternative news site has a relatively low threshold and can be considered as stimulating debate and participatory communication.

Some posted articles get a huge number of reactions and develop into a fierce debate among the ‘readers’ turning in ‘participants’. A short article on the Dutch site of Indymedia regarding the murder of the Dutch right-wing populist leader Pim Fortuyn provoked some 270 messages in one week time, posted by about 110 participants^{vii}.

The original Indymedia-article (06/05/2002):

“Pim Fortuyn shot dead”

“On May 6, Dutch popular right wing politician Pim Fortuyn was shot dead after a radio interview. This was just 9 days before general elections where Fortuyn was expected to cause an upheaval. All political parties have now ceased their campaigns.”

[<Give a short reaction to this article>](#) (link)

Variety of Participants

As most postings are anonymous through the use of a nickname, it is in theory difficult to determine where the participants are from. Only three participants posted their e-mail address and some 20 reactions were even posted without a nickname. However, because the main language in the forum was Dutch and through analysis of the content of the postings it is fair

to say that most participants are located in the Netherlands. Another substantial category of participants were Dutch-speaking Belgians. Beside this, a very limited number of participants (3) originated from the UK and Spain. This however did not prompt the Dutch-speakers to switch into another language and engage with the 'foreign' comments! Although difficult to prove empirically, the fluid character of the Indymedia-format also seems to attract participants who are not politically active in the 'real' world.

Transnational Character of Issues

As this spontaneous forum related to a specific sensitising and emotional event located within a specific local political context, the transnational character of the issues being addressed was rather low. As such, one of the main discussion-lines related to the comparison between the North-Belgian fascist party Vlaams Blok and Pim Fortuyn. The latter being an extreme-right populist and his party highly centred on his charisma and ideas and the former being a highly structured and hierarchical party embedded within a fascist ideology and history. This discussion confronted Dutch-speaking Belgians and Dutch participants to the forum and was at times very lively and heated. But it can also be argued that the debate also went beyond the local context of the Netherlands and North-Belgium, as another and maybe more interesting discussion-line was related more generally to the defence of democracy against anti-democratic forces and more specifically whether it is justified to use violence in the fight against fascism and other extreme right wing movements in society. Populism and the rise of fascism are phenomena present in many European countries. As such the transnational character of the issues being addressed can be qualified as medium, relating to a local context, but also going beyond.

Degree and Nature of Debate

Some reactions were really short, a few lines, others were longer and argumentative. About 2/3 of the participants posted only 1 message, as a reaction to the article or to a posting by someone else. 25 participants posted between 2 and 5 messages, while only 9 out of 110 participants posted more than 5 messages, one participant posted 25 messages. The way this spontaneous forum unfolded shows the fluid character of ICT-mediated participation. During the whole timeframe of the analysis—one week—new participants kept on coming in, most of them only posting one message, but some staying on and throwing themselves in the ongoing discussion. The debate between the participants can be characterised as high, hefty and at times very argumentative. Active participants started addressing each other personally, stating why they disagree or agree with someone's position(s). Most comments condemned the murder, many making abstraction of the person Fortuyn and the ideology he personified, but some participants to the spontaneous forum went so far as to justify the murder by stating, "*a good fascist is a dead fascist*" or "*who's next?*". Such strong views were however countered by other participants, which led to severe insults: "*you are a shortsighted ASSHOLE*" or "*Be careful, doomsday will come!!! All left-wing activists must fear for their life*"^{viii}. Needless to say that this kind of flaming had its effect on the ongoing debate and made some participants quit the forum.

Contributions to a Transnational Public Sphere

Contrary to the two other cases this rather spontaneous forum did attract many participants in a limited timeframe. Most of these participants only posted one message, but nevertheless the forum was not dominated by a limited number of participants. This shows a relatively low threshold for people to participate. But, this spontaneous forum was also mainly a Dutch-speaking affair. Comments from non-Dutch speaking participants did not lead to other

members engaging with them. Another remarkable difference with the ATTAC-mailinglist and the LabourStart-Forum was the polarisation and subsequent clash between ideologically opposed participants. Problematic in this regard is the anonymity of most participants and the fact that such flaming tends to put people off. However, in some way this relates much more to politics in the offline world, to conflicts, passions and antagonisms inherent to political struggles. Nevertheless, one can ask where to draw the line, especially when it concerns essentialist discourses, like racism and other forms of discriminating language. After the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in November 2004 by a muslim activist several forums were closed down, including the one on Indymedia Netherlands due to unacceptable racist remarks (Webwereld, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

Overall assessment

	Number of Participants	Variety of Participants	Transnationality of Issues	Degree of Debate
LabourStart	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
ATTAC	Low	Low	High	Medium
Indymedia	High	Low	Medium	High

Tab.5

It has to be noted that the use of the Internet in terms of interactive debate and the construction of a transnational public sphere are burdened with many constraints.

The degree of interactivity or real debate is often rather weak, as the forums and mailinglists are also used in order to inform or to mobilise. Furthermore, often only a limited number of (male) participants really discuss issues with each other. The analysis of the ATTAC mailinglist as well as the LS-forum confirms other studies concluding that online engagement in forums is cyclical, tends to be dominated by those already politically active in the offline world and functions within a homogeneous ideological framework (see Hill and Hughes 1998; Wilhelm, 2000). The spontaneous Indymedia-forum differs from the two other examples in many ways. It shows that one sensitising issue can attract a diversity of participants and opinions in a short period of time. It can also be assumed that the Indymedia-forum attracted participants that are not politically active offline. However, this also led to insulting postings and rows within the spontaneously emerged forum. It was however concluded that conflict and opposed ideological views relate more to political debate in the 'real' world than discussions between likeminded participants reasoning within a common ideological framework. This does however not legitimate racism, discrimination and insults. Conflict and passions should not be eliminated, but as Mouffe (1999) argues, mobilised, however with respect for democratic values and embedded within a democratic culture.

Besides this, it is however fair to state that (politically active) citizens engaging in a forum or discussion list do contribute to ongoing debates within the public sphere on local, but also on a whole range of transnational or unbounded issues. In this regard the Internet does facilitate short-term, as well as longer-term interactive civic engagement, which can be rather passive (receiving mails from a mailinglist) or more active (posting messages, discussing). The Internet as a medium is also well adapted to accommodate the present fluid nature of political engagement. As such interactive forums and mailinglists potentially contribute to an emerging transnational public sphere and the development of ideas of unbounded citizenship. But, it has to be noted also that with regard to the use of the Internet in terms of online civic engagement linguistic and cultural boundaries play an important role. English was dominant in the case of the LabourStart-Forum, French in the case of the ATTAC-mailinglist and Dutch in the case of the Indymedia-forum. Also, the Indymedia-forum was deemed to be less relevant in terms issues of unbounded citizenship, as it referred to the local Dutch or North Belgian contexts. However, whilst participants may be active within a locally 'bounded' context, the issues they discuss and relate to can be qualified as transnational, as was the case with the ATTAC mailinglist. While the list and its participants were clearly embedded in the local and even regional context of French-speaking Belgium, the issues being discussed and debated were not. This latter observation is crucial in understanding the dynamics between bounded and unbounded notions of citizenship. Both 'identities', bounded as well as unbounded, are present within all of us. They co-exist, compete and sometimes even conflict. The Internet allows us to reach out, to go beyond our local-national bounded setting, without however completely detaching ourselves from that local context.

The most important conclusion with regard to unbounded notions of citizenship in relation to the use of the Internet and the construction of a transnational public sphere is precisely that unbounded citizenship cannot be viewed as being separate from boundaries and the local context of citizens. This co-existence of bounded notions of citizenship and unbounded

notions should be explored further as it also points to conceptual flaws and complex interaction between the two notions. With regard to boundedness, rights, accountability, as well as duties are often well defined. Unbounded citizenship, in turn, remains a rather empty concept as there is an absence of accountability, of rights, but also of duties. Problematic in this regard is the fact that nation state notions of citizenship refer very much to who is part of and who is not part of or outside society, to the citizen and 'the other'. This becomes very problematic when viewed in terms of unbounded global or cosmopolitan citizenship. Should struggles at an international level of governance lead towards truly 'universal' rights and who will subsequently enforce such bounded 'unbounded' rights? Nation state citizenship cannot be viewed anymore without taking into account unbounded notions of citizenship, but at the same time unbounded citizenship becomes an empty concept when it isn't backed-up with rights and institutions that can enforce those rights. As David Held (1997: 263) quite rightly states:

“Cosmopolitan democracy involves the development of administrative capacity and independent political resources at regional and global levels as a necessary complement to those in local and national polities. A cosmopolitan democracy would not call for a diminution per se of state power and capacity across the globe. Rather, it would seek to entrench and develop democratic institutions at regional and global levels as a necessary complement to those at the level of the nation-state.”

The empirical analysis of the transnational nature of the cases and of the interactive spaces for online interactive debate they provide furthermore shows that the notion of an emerging transnational public sphere is highly problematic. While the issues being addressed might be transnational, participants are often located in the Western Hemisphere, discussion often happens between likeminded activists and the importance of language and cultural conflict with the conceptualisation of a unified—Habermassian—transnational public sphere. As such it is maybe more relevant to speak of transnational *sphericules* (cf. Gitlin, 1998) that interact and converge, but also fragment and diverge at given times.

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ⁱⁱ TERRA - an IST2000-program & EMTEL2 - a 5th framework program, both financed by the EU

ⁱⁱⁱ Analysis from 11/11/2001 till 19/02/2002

^{iv} Analysis from 3/03/2002 till 6/06/2002

^v The category 'Anti-Fascism' relates foremost to the victory of J-M Le Pen in the first round of the French presidential elections in April 2002

^{vi} The category 'Latin America' relates to messages on Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina and Chile

^{vii} Analysis from 6/05/2002—the day of the murder—till 15/05/2002

^{viii} Translations by the authors