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*Empowerment and
e-Participation in Civil Society:
Local, National and
International Implications
Workshop Proceedings*

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Impressum

Introduction to "Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications" Workshop Proceedings[1]

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Abstract. While there has been extensive investigation of government-initiated (top-down) forms of e-participation, the *Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications* workshop provided an opportunity to share knowledge on how civil society actors are using technologies for democratic bottom-up empowerment. The workshop was held in conjunction with two European research networks, DEMO-net and CINEFOGO. This publication includes selected proceedings from the workshop.

1 Workshop scope

DEMO-net[2] (the European e-Participation Network of Excellence) hosted a workshop to examine how the internet and ICTs are reshaping citizens' social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) through new forms of media and participation. The workshop, titled *Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications*, was held at

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1 This introduction is an edited version of the workshop report which can be found here:
   http://www.electronicgovernment.se/demo_net_WS_2008/

2 http://www.demo-net.org/

Gythyttan Inn near Örebro University, Sweden on May 9th and 10th 2008 in conjunction with the Civil Society and New Forms of Governance in Europe (CINEFOGO)[1] conference *Normative Implications of New Forms of Participation for Democratic Policy Processes*.

At this forum, we shared both the theoretical and empirical research on e-participation in civil society actors such as media, communities, social movements and NGOs. Important topics the workshop addressed include:

1. How are civil society actors using the Internet for political communication? What democratic changes are this leading to?
2. Do e-participation developments affect civil society by providing new platforms for debate and engagement? How?
3. Will the Internet revitalize or erode offline associations and community life? How are online communities similar or different from offline ones?
4. Is the use of ICTs for internal organization of civil society actors enabling more internal participation?
5. Is the rise of new media (blogs, wikis, etc.) leading to a more participative form of media?

2 Selected proceedings

Of the more than 30 submissions to the workshop, five selections are included in this publication. Two of the selections answer the questions above by looking at particular civil society blogs, while the other three articles address the questions from national perspectives.

In the first chapter, "Are Political Weblogs Public Spheres or Partisan Spheres? A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Online Participations and Implications for Civic Participation in the Internet Age," Ravi Vatrapu, Scott Robertson, Wimal Dissanayake and Aparajita Jeedigunta investigate an American blog called Eschaton. As many wonder if the internet will provide a new form of 'public sphere,' the authors use this case to describe in what ways political blogs may and may not constitute 'public spheres'.

The second chapter, "Framing Issues, Fomenting Change, 'Feministing': A Contemporary Feminist Blog in the Landscape of Online Political Activism" by Jessica Mowles, uses a feminist methodology to relate a particular feminist blog, 'Feministing,' to wider research on blogging. She argues that while blogs have become centers of political discourse, they are not yet having substantial affects on policy.

Three of the articles look at civil society and e-participation in particular countries. Peter Mambrey presents the German developments within the civil

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1 http://www.cinefogo.org/

society and e-participation arena in the article "Civil Society and eParticipation: The German perspective" in the third chapter.

Three researchers, Anna Carola Freschi, Luca Raffini and Michela Balocchi, describe Italian grassroots online politics in the fourth chapter, "What kind of grassroots e-participation? The uneasy demand of a new politics in Italy: between continuity and innovation." They look at historical developments beginning with early experiments, moving on to social movements (especially anti-globalization), then the rise of grassroots blogs (particularly the case of beppegrillo.it), and finally other activism like political positioning games and representative accountability.

The final chapter presents an empirical study of Bulgaria by Hannu Larsson, Vasilena Neykova and Wang Ruili. The authors investigate young, well-educated Bulgarians' views on online versus offline political participation. Although they find that the youth are interested in e-participation, corruption and lack of trust in civil society, politics and government hinder participation in Bulgaria.

3 Conclusion

Civil society and e-participation are emerging phenomenon. The following chapters begin exploration of this phenomenon from two perspectives, 1) analyses of specific incarnations of the phenomenon (i.e. blogs), and 2) analyses of the phenomenon in specific countries. We hope these studies inspire further investigation of how information and communication technologies are changing civil society.

Are Political Weblogs Public Spheres or Partisan Spheres?

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Abstract. In this paper we argue that political weblogs can be theoretically construed and empirically evaluated as public spheres, albeit with some technological and sociological limitations. Rethinking participation in a public sphere to include "emotional achievement" as a key aspect, we posit that political weblogs can function as public spheres for creating, structuring, and influencing political discourse. Interpretations from a virtual ethnographic field study of online participations in a political weblog community are presented as evidence for considering emotional achievement and online identity politics as important aspects of online public spheres such as political blogs. However, there is a danger of political blogs functioning as partisan spheres instead of as true public spheres that imbue the notion of critical rationality and the principle of equality of communicative action. Situating political blogs within the literature on virtual publics, we present "voter centered design" of electronic voting portals as a viable alternative to political blogs. Based on the findings of the virtual ethnographic study, we draw several implications for civic participation and democratic deliberation in the present Internet age. We discuss briefly how the emergence of *technological intersubjectivity* as a mode of human social relations, *digital positivism* as a mode of human epistemic relations with external reality are resulting not only in new discursive formations but also leading to a *civic panopticon*, or the civic surveillance of people and places of power.

1 Introduction

Operating from within the intertwined information ecologies (Nardi & O'Day, 1999) of the Internet; print media; network television; and cable television, political blogs are having a non-trivial impact on public discourses and politics (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). Notably, in the United States of America, the use of Internet for political news and purposes has been in ascendency (Raine, Horrigan, & Cornfield, 2005). A longitudinal study conducted by the Center for the Digital Future[1], USC Annenberg School, on public opinion about the importance of Internet for political campaigning found steady and significant agreement since 2005. Figure 1 presents the longitudinal comparison results from 2005, 2006, and 2007 to the survey question of: "Do you think the Internet has become important for political campaigning process?"

Figure 1: Longitudinal Comparison of the Importance of Internet for Political Campaigning[2].

The picture that emerges from the several surveys of Internet usage for political news and purposes is that the phenomenon is significant, stable, and here to stay. The objective of the research project reported here is to study the political blogging aspect of this phenomenon. We are particularly interested in investigating the sociological functions, technological features, and civic democratic characteristics of political blogs. Such an investigation should allow us to understand political blogs' functions as well as their broader societal impact. Towards this end, we have conducted a virtual ethnographic study of the political

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1 http://www.digitalcenter.org/

2 It is interesting to note that survey perceptions of Internet importance for political campaigning is lower in the election year of 2006 compared to 2005 and 2007.
   (Source: http://www.digitalcenter.org/media/upload//q190e_m3_small.gif)

blogosphere in the United States with an analytical focus on the un-moderated user comments of one particular blog posting of a popular political blog.

This introductory section is organized into four parts. First, we will offer a brief overview of weblogs and political weblogs. Second, we will analyze Habermas' (1991a, 1991b) original conception of "public sphere" by engaging Fraser's (1992) critical review. Third, we will offer Yang's {, 2000 #135} conceptualization of "emotional achievement" as a crucial addition to Habermasian prerequisites of a critical rationality and equality of communicative action for civic participation in the public sphere. Fourth, we will discuss the concept of online identity and the resulting online identity politics.

1.1 Weblogs

A "blog" is a portmanteau of "web" and "log". A blog[1] is basically a journal that is available on the Internet. The activity of maintaining a blog is "blogging" and someone who maintains a blog by posting blog entries is a "blogger". Blogs are typically updated using computer software. Blogging allows people with little or no technical background to update and maintain a web journal of their activities and interests. Postings on a blog are almost always arranged in reverse chronological order with the most recent additions featured most prominently. Blogs typically incorporate web syndication[2] and as such their content is available for subscription and aggregation. Blogs range from individual diaries to collective presence of political campaigns, media programs and corporations, and from single author to having a large community of writers. The totality of weblogs or blog-related webs is usually called the blogosphere[3]. A blog can be accessed through a regular web browser or an email client or by software applications such as newsreaders or feed aggregators.

1.2 Political Weblogs

A political blog consists of an individual or a small group of individuals posting views and commentary on political news, events, and media narratives. Political bloggers sometimes use their blogs to make calls for donations to political causes and campaigns. Political bloggers usually identify with a political ideology. Many political blogs allow public participation through the reader comments section. Like other kinds of blogs, many political blogs also include a "blog roll" which is a listing of links to other blogs and bloggers.

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1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_syndication

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogosphere

1.3 Public Sphere

Habermas (1991a) defines 'public sphere' as "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" (p.398). Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as a mediating space between the state and the civil society. A public sphere is a democratic space where public interests, opinions, agendas and problems are formed, transformed, and exchanged by citizens' proactive participation. The relationship between citizens engaged in public discourse and communication is the critical feature of a public sphere. Critical rationality, equality, freedom of expression, and dissemination are the necessary conditions for the proper structuring and functioning of a Habermasian public sphere. Figure 2 presents a schematic of Habermas' Public Sphere.

Private Realm	**Public Sphere**	Sphere of
		Public Authority
Civil Society	**in the**	State
	Political Realm	

Figure 2: Schematic of Habermas' Public Sphere

Habermas derived the notion of public spheres from a study of English salons, French cafes, and German table corners in Western Europe and with an explicit focus on print media. Fraser (1992) pointed out the actual limitations in realistic practices of the public sphere compared to the normative features outlined by Habermas. Fraser contends that democracy itself has limitations in terms of institutions, mechanisms, and representations and conceptualizes public sphere as conditions and practices of social life world, rather than an essential condition in a democratic life world. In a Habermasian public sphere, communicative action based on equality in communication process is a prerequisite. According to Fraser, this prerequisite of equality is not a given. Instead, the prerequisite of equality depends on the participation and representation of multiple interests and perspectives in public discourses in egalitarian and multicultural societies. This point comes into sharp relief when we consider civic participation and democratic deliberation in the Internet age. Digital divide and digital literacy are significant factors in determining access to and engagement in online public spheres and discussion forums. Next, we discuss emotional achievement as a crucial catalyst

for and product of civic participation in public sphere in addition to the critical-rationality and equality of communicative action norms of a public sphere.

1.4 Emotional Achievement

Traditionally, individuals' participation in public spheres has been explained by intrinsic motivational factors of personal responsibility and extrinsic motivational factors of community interests and benefits. Affective factors of interacting with social others in a public sphere have been largely neglected. According to Whittier (2001), a social movement setting provides emotional opportunities. Applying Hochschild's (1979) concept of management of emotional labor to social movement settings, Whittier (2001) argues that emotional labor constitutes processes by which individuals manage their own emotions with the aim of promoting particular affective responses in those involved and influenced by the social movement. Emotional display by the activists is a result of this interaction between emotional opportunities and emotional labor. Yang (2000) defines emotion as situational, interactional, and temporal self-feelings. Yang (2000) conceptualizes emotional achievement as "the attainment of self-validating emotional experiences and expressions through active and creative pursuit." Yang's theoretical conceptualization of emotions includes self-feelings, and the emotional achievement of activists reflects and contributes to the achievement of individual and collective identity. As liminal phenomena social movements provide situations which allow individuals to achieve emotions and the self-realizations otherwise denied in ordinary social settings. Yang argues that the relationships between the processes of the emotion achievement and the identity achievement are useful to understand mobilization in social movements. We think that emotional achievement can serve as an additional explanatory concept for the activity of political blogging and user participation in blog comment sections. The efficacy and effectiveness of a public sphere depend not only on the critical rational persuasive discursive enunciations of the participants but also on their critical emotional enunciations. Persuasive speech can incorporate both rationality and emotionality of actors, particularly in public discourses on politics in public spheres. This brings us to a key factor in online discourse analysis of political blogs, online identity politics.

1.5 Online Identity Politics

Miller (1995) citing Goffman (1959) observes that "an interpretation of Goffman's work, and that of the Symbolic Interactionist school in sociology, is that self is developed and maintained, as well as presented, in interaction." Miller poses the critical question of whether there are different kinds and categories of electronic self-identities which can be presented and maintained online in the so-called cyberspace, apart from the corporeal self-identities rooted in the physical

world. According to Miller, there are no qualitative differences in the identity mechanisms and processes between the physical and online realms. This has direct relevance and implication for analyzing individuals' participation in public spheres when those public spheres are no longer conventional physical world "brick and mortar" spaces (such as table corners, cafes, and salons analyzed by Habermas, or the Italian public squares) but are online spaces for interaction and engagement. The empirical study presented in this paper investigated one such online space for interaction and engagement: a political weblog.

2 Methodology

Based on the above theoretical framework, the first author conducted a virtual ethnographic study of the political blog Eschaton[1]. Eschaton is a highly popular political blog maintained by Dr. Duncan Black under the pseudonym of "Atrios". The blog postings are often critical of the traditional print and television media reporting of the political news and events. Hine (2000) advocates the use of virtual ethnography as a device to render the use of the Internet as problematic in itself. Hine argues that rather than being inherently sensible, the Internet acquires its sensibility in use. Below, we will provide a brief exposition of Hine's ten principles of virtual ethnography in the context of research study presented in this paper.

2.1 The Principles of Virtual Ethnography (VE) (Hine, 2000)

1. *Sustained interaction to "reduce the puzzlement":* The first author spent a substantial amount of time on the political weblog Eschaton and became well-acquainted with the practices of this community.
2. *Interactive media like the Internet should be understood both as a culture and as a cultural artifact:* Particular attention was paid to the notion of the site of interaction; the user comments forum in relation to the blog culture and the totality of "blogosphere".
3. *VE can be usefully thought of as a mobile than multisided:* Adhering to this principle, we excluded the political economy of the weblogs and the audience research measures from our analytical focus.
4. *Object of VE can usefully be shaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle*: Political Blogs in most cases add another layer of interpretation to traditional political discourse and news. Political blogs are self-referential to the extent that their postings refer to earlier posts by the same blogger as well as the postings of other bloggers.
5. *Boundaries must be discovered. They are not to be assumed a priori but explored through the course of VE. Online and Offline boundaries must be formulated and then VE could be stopped:* In this virtual ethnographic

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1 http://atrios.blogspot.com

study of Eschaton, online boundaries were discovered *a posteriori*. The online boundary was one blog entry and the related user comments for that particular entry.

6. *VE is interstitial, in that it fits into the other activities of both ethnographer and subjects. Immersion in the setting is only intermittently achieved:* The first author did not forgo his "normal life" to conduct this virtual ethnography. His immersion in the "field site" was indeed intermittent.

7. *VE is necessarily partial. VE accounts are based on strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities:* The choice of the particular blog and the particular blog entry were based on this principle.

8. *VE can use the ethnographer as informant and embrace the reflexive dimension. VE integrates all interactions with technology:* In accordance with this principle, we offer a reflexive interpretive account of the Eschaton blog readers' comments.

9. *VE is ethnography in, of and through the virtual. All interactions are valid not just face-to-face:* This addresses the lack of face-to-face interviews and audience research measures of the Eschaton blog community.

10. *VE is adaptive ethnography and yet not methodologically pure*: We make no methodological claims for the sanctity or purity of this virtual ethnographic observation beyond closely adhering to these principles.

2.2 Orienting Questions

The following three orienting questions were used to inform the virtual ethnographic study.

1. To what extent are political weblogs public spheres?
2. How do online identity politics play out in the participants' comments?
3. How do online identities structure the discourse? Or conversely, how do online discourses structure identities?

3 Results

In the next three sections, we address each of the above orienting questions by analyzing the user comments. In particular, we relate reader comments to their explicitly created online identities. As mentioned before, our analytical focus is on users responding to one particular blog posting on Eschaton.

1. To what extent are political weblogs public spheres?

Most political blogs include an open door feature for blog readers to post their comments. Some political activist blogs require that users register (registration is usually free). Mandatory registration requires every user to create an online

identity (also known as username/userid/handle/virtual identity) and sometimes also to password protect the online identity. On such blogs, only registered users are able to post their comments to a particular blog entry and comments can be moderated. The posting of reader comments, on such closely moderated political blogs, is at the sole discretion of the blog owner(s). A user's online identity earns reputation, respect and trust based on the perceived quality of postings and feedback ratings from other readers. Another comment posting policy is implemented by the "free for all" or "open to all" political blogs like Eschaton. Anybody can post comments on the blog postings at Eschaton. Comments are not moderated. Comments can be related to the blog entry or take off at a tangent to seemingly unrelated items. A reader *needs to create an identity every time* a comment is posted. Frequent posters can make their online identities persist between sessions by using one particular online identity across comment postings.

In inquiring to what extent political blogging and political blog post commenting constitute a new kind of public sphere participation we need to discuss the notion of modernity imbued in the technological infrastructure of blogs. Modernity for Habermas was characterized by rationality and reason (Seidman, 1989) whereas for Bourdieu, it was the differentiated and autonomous field called habitus (Lash, 1993). Agents act uncoercively in Bourdieu's habitus (1977a, 1977b) and the reflexivity of agents characterizes modernity in contrast to the rationality of citizens and their communicative actions in Habermas' public sphere. Bourdieu claims that the economic and cultural spheres are increasingly becoming to resemble each other in the material economy of modernity (Lash, 1993). We argue that political blogs incorporate the reflexive aspect of a habitus while also displaying the public sphere characterizations of Habermas.

Political blogs like Eschaton enable a variety of sociological functions. They disseminate private opinion and through its distribution and consumption lead to participation and interaction. Through deliberation with other bloggers and blog readers they allow the formation of public opinion (or in the least a partisan community opinion) about issues and topics of common interest to the blogging community. Bloggers, through their blog postings call for activism and advocate for issues. Of course, given the nature of political blogs, these sociological functions are always already political functions. The political economy of the political blogs can be carefully controlled by the bloggers. If they choose to do so, bloggers can exercise control over the economic aspects of their blogs such as advertisements and endorsements[1]. If the public sphere provides an intermediate space between the state and civil society for the dissemination, discussion, and deliberation of issues and enables communicative action grounded in equality and rationality, then with the qualifying caveats of digital divide and digital literacy, political blogs indeed provide such an intermediary space. However, whether political blogs can be complete and true public spheres where diversities of

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1 For example, see Advertise Liberally (http://web.blogads.com/advertise/liberal_blog_advertising_network)

opinion, ideological affiliation, and interests are heard and tolerated remains to be empirically documented and shown. At their best, political blogs are virtual public spheres. At their worst, political blogs can evolve into partisan community spheres instead of public spheres. We will have more to say on the danger of political blogs turning to partisan spheres later in the discussion section. Derived from our empirically analysis, Table I lists the public sphere characteristics of political weblogs.

Sociological Functions	Dissemination
	Opinion
	Activism
	Advocacy
Technological Features	User Comments
	Trackback
	Blog roll
	Unmoderated vs. Moderated
	Open Door vs. Registration
Public Sphere Characteristics	Freedom of Expression
	Participation
	Interaction
	Rationality
	Emotionality
	Authority

Table I: Public Sphere Characteristics of Political Weblogs (derived from the empirical study)

3.1 Emotional Achievement in Virtual Public Spheres

Yang's (2000) conceptualization of "emotional achievement" can help us better understand public participation in these political weblogs. Conceptualizing emotional achievement as a catalyst for and a product of online interactions in political blogs and its application to virtual public spheres adds to the traditional accounts of public sphere participations in terms of individuals' communicative actions and intentions. Castells (1996) pointed out that in the developed economies of the industrialized nations, traditional manufacturing jobs have given way to information production concentrated on an educated section of the population aged between 25 and 40. He predicted that the individualization of labor will lead to a highly segmented social structure. It is in this politically divisive and socially segmented United States of America that political blogs operate. We agree with Kurt Reymers (1998) that:

Since emotion, identity and meaning are so closely tied, a relationship clearly exists between emotion and self. Whereas reason is an internalization or self-justification for an event or circumstance that is created by the subject/object condition of agreement or understanding, emotion is often the outlet for a dearth in the subject/object condition (the lack of an understanding of a situation or circumstance one is confronted with; the lack of a socially constructed meaning). The subject/object condition is ultimately an attempt at learning and understanding. When we lack understanding, we must engage this circumstance of the subject/object condition and attempt to gain an understanding of our situation. Sometimes this is quite impossible. (...) Our identities are created not only by our understandings of the world that we perceive through communication with others, but equally (if not more so) by our inability to understand the world around us, and the communications we exchange with others in order to facilitate the impression of taking an epistemological stance. (Reymers, 1998)

Political blogs serve as a meeting point for people of similar and dissimilar political leanings to be informed of and to interact with political events and news, articulate their reactions, and to let out their feelings and emotions to feel validated, satisfied, and informed besides fulfilling civic responsibilities. Political blogs enable virtual "water cooler" conversations where individuals whether they are political activists or not can stay informed of and connected to the political talking points and people. Of course, political blogs can develop a cult following and associations in the current emotively charged US political arena. Group identities on political blogs are constructed, negotiated, and articulated in blog postings and reader participations. Within political blog communities such as Eschaton, one finds the sociological processes of group identity formation, social construction and negotiation of the in-group/out-group identities, associated boundaries, accepted norms, rules, and chores.

2. How does online identity politics play out in the participants' comments?

The ability to create a new identity for each posting gives the political blog readers the capability to create multiple identities to not only post their views but also to let that identity subvert, oppose, and/or resist the reading of the posting itself. For example, a reader reacting to the news that the attorney general John Ashcroft has tendered his resignation playfully assumed the identity of "***John Ashcroft***" and posted the following comment:

> "Whew! Now I can FINALLY get back to the business of being a hardcore alky!
> Let my resignation SOAR...!"

The above comment can be read as an act of subversion of Ashcroft's real identity and authority. It can also be read as an attempt at humor masking the deep contempt for Ashcroft's power and authority. Comment threads of political blog postings serve as performance sites for the identity politics of the political blog

readers. Reader constructed identities create and add to the meanings of their comments. Other readers might read a particular reader's comment(s) complying with the preferred dominant reading of popular discourse on the blog entry or negotiate meanings or construct oppositional meanings (Hall, 1980, 1997). Online identity can play a crucial role in signifying the received meaning. Readers realize that their online identity matters and it is based on that recognition that they create identities to supplement as well as complement their comments. When a reader posts a comment by identifying as *"No More Mr. Nice Guy!"* the self-declared identity influences possible readings to the actual posting. It is not always entirely the substantive content of the comments that signifies the comment poster's intentions or reactions; online identities can successfully do that too. Kaplan (1993) says *"such a challenge to dominant constructs is basic to the politics of the signifier."* When readers post as "*foilhatgrrl*" or "*chicago dyke",* the politics of the signifier in their online identities comes to the foreground.

> "Good going A. Only sane place for the reality based commuity to turn to these days."
> *foilhatgrrl*
>
> " (…)it's not foil, it's reality: all the bush administration has done in four years is lie, cheat and steal from others. why would voting be any difference?(…) there were reasons people believed that slogan, and no amount of 'faith' in the SoS in OH is going to change that."
> *chicago dyke*

On political blogs, readers articulate their understandings or lack of understandings of the subject/object world and perceived reality by creating reflective identities like *"numbby", "Pass the Foil", "jiggy wid it" , "SPIN BUSTER", "Straw Man" and "Semiconscious".* The fluidity, the flexibility, and the technology supported capability to create online identities allow the readers to closely bind emotion and meaning with their online comments. Johnston (2003) states that:

> The Internet offers many opportunities for people to take on roles and attributes other than those they have in real life. These opportunities have always been there. Any form of social interaction at a distance –whether it is by letter, telephone or mailing list – is open to this kind of development. Real life however gives us an easy way of establishing credentials. (Johnston, 2003)

Some readers create, claim, and maintain their credentials by assuming the identities of the authority figures they quote or cite. Readers sometimes create identities like *"Morpheus"* and *"Spinoza".* Since the social interaction on the political blogs occurs at a distance in physical reality but in proximity in online reality, credentials and trust are sometimes built by playfully assuming the identity of the immediate authority.

3. How does online identity structure the discourse? Or conversely, how does discourse structure online identities?

Readers sometimes create identities that are grounded in their actual physical location on the planet by including a reference to the space they are located in or space(s) they identify with or space(s) they presently occupy; for example *"Cary in Tn", "NYMary", "Brooklyn Rob", "chris/tx", "David in NY", "Elaine in NY"* and *NMRed"*. Political blogs are not usually primary sites for the discussions on popular culture but readers do occasionally bring in popular culture references. Readers created identities such as *"HAL9000"* (reference to the infamous self-conscious computer in Stanley Kubrick's movie 2001: A Space Odyssey), *"mdhatter"* (possibly a contraction of madhatter, a reference to a character in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland), *"Morpheus"* (possibly a reference to the visionary rebel leader of free humans in the The Matrix movie trilogy). In doing so, they assume a popular culture common ground with other readers. If some readers miss the reference to the popular culture icon, then meanings are interactionally negotiated and arrived at. Although the identities created and presented by political blog readers might not be fundamentally different from the identities created and presented in other online mediums, the global and local contexts of the political blogs differ significantly to other online and real life communication situations. Online identities function as corrugated props to the articulation of the meanings of the readers' comments. All in all, participation in political blogs is a creative interactional accomplishment by the readers of the political blogs and they are shaping public discourse to a non-trivial extent in the USA (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). Some cable news organizations such as CNN[1] feature a blog section in their telecasts and blogs are also displacing the role of newspaper headlines with respect to early morning news shows in the USA.

4 Discussion

The public sphere, as we have pointed out, is an extremely useful concept that enables us to understand the dynamics of modern society. So far this concept has been theorized largely in terms of the nation-state. Congruence among the nation state, national citizenry and the public sphere has been repeatedly pointed out. This becomes evident in the writings of theorists of the public sphere such as Jurgen Habermas (1991a, 1991b), Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993), and Miriam Hansen (1993). In a rapidly globalizing world, what is needed is to locate the public sphere within a transnational frame. Manuel Castells (2001) talks about new information and communication technologies restructuring the world into a new informational global economy. We, in this paper, have sought to underline the importance of the interconnections between the internet and the

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1 http://edition.cnn.com/

public sphere, thereby enabling the public sphere to be understood productively within a transnational frame. This, we believe is a vital exegetical move in relation to current scholarship on the public sphere. Within the context of political blogging in the USA and based on our virtual ethnographic study, we will now discuss the questions posed by the DEMO-net research group on e-participation[1].

4.1 What new forms of political action are emerging? What old forms are evolving?

We are observing an emergence of a technology supported political action. Old forms of advocacy, activism, lobbying, and voting are evolving to incorporate the new civic participation and engagement possibilities enabled by the emerging technologies. However, as we mentioned already, there is a danger that online communities in general and political blogs in particular might develop into partisan community spheres instead of true public spheres based on equality and rationality of communicative action. Further, sustained involvement in the various political blog communities requires a significant amount of interactional labor and many civil society actors might be concerned with the interactional costs that ensue. Political blogs and other civic participation technologies do not offer integrated solutions to the processes of political information gathering, evaluating and decision-making. In our opinion, political information and communication technologies and e-voting portals can provide a valuable political decision making and voting service to the general public. Further, they can also provide exciting digital deliberation and democracy alternatives to existing new media forms like blogs. Towards this end, Scott Robertson has proposed a research program towards "Voter-Centered Design" (Robertson, 2005, 2006; Robertson, Wania, Abraham, & Park, 2008).

5 An Alternative to Political Blogs: Voter-Centered Design of Electronic Voting Portals

While political discourse has increased exponentially on the Internet, it remains partitioned into realms of discourse rather than integrated into a coherent public sphere. Political blogs are famously limited to individuals who agree with their particular point of view, and the blogosphere requires liaisons to bring people across political divides (Adamic & Glance, 2005). In this way, the blogosphere reflects our contemporary polarized political culture and works against a shared dialogue necessary in a pluralistic society (Barber, 2004; Pocock, 1973).

In addition to partisan segregation of blogs, political discourse on the Internet remains separated from political action such as candidate comparison or voting.

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1 http://www.electronicgovernment.se/demo_net_ws_2008/

Figure 3 below shows how a voting decision is embedded in increasingly social spheres involving decision making, information gathering, attitude formation, and cultural influence.
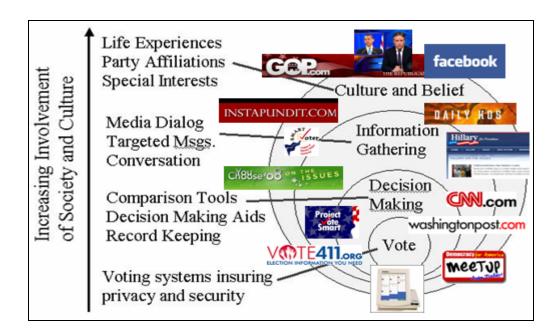

Figure 3. Socio-technical applications used by voters are located in increasingly social realms of discourse but seldom span multiple levels.

Socio-technical applications are located at different places in these discourse spheres, however they seldom cross over. For example, at present, an electronic voting machine is a tool only for presenting choices to a voter and allowing the voter to make selections. It cannot be used for information gathering or as an aid to decision making. Similarly, at present, a video sharing environment like YouTube can be used to gather information about candidates and issues, but not for voting. A blog can be used to support attitude formation and encourage cultural cohesion, but does not usually support information gathering. Social networking sites such as Facebook[1] have begun to integrate some socio-technical applications from different spheres by mashing up comments from friends, the pages of politicians, and some news, however it remains difficult to use multiple applications in an integrated way, especially for non-expert or non-technical computer users. For example, it is difficult for someone to examine a candidate comparison sheet from an online voter guide while at the same time discussing the candidates with others using a social networking tool. Similarly, it would be unlikely that a search tool would return a "crossover sample" of items related to a political topic – for example a blog, a video, a voter guide, some media items, a

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1 http://www.facebook.com

Myspace[1] account, and a candidate website – as top items in response to a single query.

From a *design* standpoint, we might ask whether it is possible to create an environment that supports broad civic participation using multiple integrated socio-technical applications instead of allowing only evolutionary development of the public discourse environment. Evolutionary development is more likely to result in a myriad of isolated technologies that reflect both the partisan environment and the commercial application development environment. A recent study of a combined voting/browsing portal (Robertson et al., 2005) suggests that designing an integrated environment will not be straightforward in part because it is difficult for voters to maintain multiple simultaneous goals related to different decision-making tasks. However, this type of resource allocation difficulty is exactly what a well-designed integration environment might be useful for. Other studies by the same group (Robertson et al., 2008) show that various forms of portal and ballot integration have tremendous influence both on the information those voters receive in search results and also on their search and decision-making strategies. For example, when voters use a traditional search tool such as Google to learn about candidates, they quickly find candidate websites, spend about half of their time exclusively looking at candidate websites, and are guided to other Internet resources by the links within candidate websites (Robertson, Wania, & Park, 2007). However, changing the interface to the search tool so that it helps voters to remember all of the candidates and presents multiple issues for their consideration results in considerably less influence of the candidates' websites (Robertson et al., 2008). Considerable research remains to be done on how different online tools influence voters and how the design of political information tools might influence voters' strategies and decisions.

Blogs and social spaces that allow users to interlink with other Internet resources are a step towards spanning levels of decision making. Facebook's different Wall applications allow users to post a video from a video sharing site, or an image from a photo sharing site, or a news story from a media site, along with a comment which is then broadcast to the "Newsfeed" sections of all of their friends. This can result in cycles of information sharing that pull from multiple sources and that are developed jointly by a group of friends. This activity spans some of the outer spheres in Figure 3. An interesting design challenge would be to incorporate some aspects of each user's local ballot into a social networking environment so that information sharing cycles can lead directly to decision making and ballot actions.

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1 http://www.myspace.com

5.1 How are civil society actors using the Internet for political communication? What democratic changes, if any, is this leading to?

From our own observations, we can say that civil society actors are increasingly and successfully using Internet blogs for political communication, coordination, advocacy, activism, and campaign financing. Many political campaigns and political parties in the USA now maintain blogs and political bloggers are increasingly influential on both the campaign trail and as well as for voter mobilization on the voting day. Daily Kos[1], an influential political blog associated with progressive politics and the Democratic Party in the USA has page visits in the order of millions on some prominent news event days. In the United States, information and communication technologies (ICT) usage and particularly blogging has led to an the emergence of a new kind of political collectivity known as the "net roots" similar to "grass roots" of the traditional politics (Dalton, 2007). We analogize that just as "grass roots" participated in and contributed to physical public spheres; "net roots" participate in and contribute to online public spheres such as political blogs.

5.1.1 Digital Positivism

Civil society actors are increasingly using the Internet to document and share reality. The documentation and dissemination of events and intersubjective perspectives on objective events was once the sole province of professional journalism which controlled access to the mass media publication avenues of print media, public television and radio, network television, broadcast radio, and cable television. The rapid diffusion of relatively cheap (in the Western socio-economic context) audio-video recording devices such as mobile phones, camcorders, webcams, digital voice recorders, computers, and the availability of free or low-cost Internet hosting and sharing services have empowered civil actors with the capabilities to record and share their lives as well as their realities. This capability has also been extended to record and share and thereby document the lives of social others. We term this emerging new human relationship with external reality "digital positivism". In this emerging era of digital positivism, the objective reality of an event is intersubjectively established through the warrants of digital artifacts that are themselves based on technological grounds. The degree of the objective reality of an event in the intersubjective public discursive realm, under digital positivism, depends therefore on the positive ontological existence of a digital artifact[2].

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1 http://www.dailykos.com

2 As a participant at the demo-NET workshop (http://www.electronicgovernment.se/demo_net_ws_2008/), put it: "If a tree falls in a forest and there is no YouTube video of it, then did the tree really fall?"

5.1.2 Civic Panopticon[1]

We think that the emergence of a "show me the digital artifact" in public deliberation and argumentation will lead to a profound shift in how politicians go about campaigning and interacting with the general public. This has the potential for an inverted "panopticon" where civic actors utilize opportunities to monitor those in power or those that seek power and document their practices. Foucault (1977) invoked Bentham's notion of panopticon in the penitentiary institutions as a way to discursively constitute the subject and to "discipline and punish" the socially deviant and ethically errant subject with technological means. We posit here the emergence of a "civic panopticon". Utilizing the increasing ubiquity and affordability of information and communication technologies and reality documenting gadgets and devices, civil society actors are able, to a certain extent, to return the gaze of the state apparatus and agents of the state apparatus. An example of this state of affairs is the "macaca comment"[2] in the 2006 Senate race in Virginia, USA. Another example is the Bosnia sniper[3] fire claim incident during Hillary Rodham Clinton's 2008 US Democratic party presidential nomination campaign. Yet another example of the digital positivism and civic panopticon is the role of actors and digital artifacts in the Abu-Ghraib[4] prison scandal.

5.2 Do e-participation developments affect civil society by providing new platforms for debate and engagement? How?

Recent developments in the United States presidential primary election campaigning indicate that e-participation is indeed providing new platforms for debate and engagement. Social sharing sites such as YouTube and social networking sites such as Facebook have emerged as online platforms for debate and engagement. For example, political campaigns are starting to use online social sharing platforms such as YouTube to disseminate candidate speeches and other campaign material (Walters, 2007). Also, some followers of political candidates are posting "viral videos" in support of their candidates or deriding the opponents. For the first time in US political campaigning history, the news organization CNN hosted a debate in conjunction with YouTube. Candidates responded to citizen questions posted on the YouTube website as videos. The creators of the selected videos were invited to attend the debate in person[5]. For the 2006 US mid-term

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1 Related to Jamais Cascio's notion of Participatory Panopticon http://www.worldchanging.com/
     archives/002651.html

2 http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/08/24/politics/main1931999.shtml

3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BfNqhV5hg4

4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_prisoner_abuse

5 http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/youtubedebates/index.html

elections, Facebook created an account and Facebook entry for each of the Democratic and Republican candidates and encouraged candidates, their campaigns, and Facebook users to engage in debate and discourse (Williams & Gulati, 2007). The Internet is currently undergoing a paradigm shift towards a participatory mode of interaction and we expect this to impact civic democratic practices profoundly. However, there is a need for rigorous empirical work to document and explicate this emerging and promising phenomenon.

5.3 Will the Internet revitalize or erode offline associations and community life? How are online communities similar or different from offline ones?

Theoretically, e-participation leads to the formation and sustainment of technological intersubjectivity (Vatrapu, 2007).

> Technological intersubjectivity (TI) refers to an interactional social relationship between two or more participants. This interactional social relationship emerges from a dynamic interplay between the functional association of the participants as communicators and the empathetic association of the participants as actors in a technology supported self-other relationship.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have changed the social fabric of our relations with others and object in fundamental ways. Our interactions with others and objects are increasingly shaped by the logic of technology, hence the construct of technological intersubjectivity. In technological intersubjectivity, computational support can enhance the communicative possibilities and the experiential potentials of two or more individuals. Socio-technical environments have potentials for both psychological and phenomenological intersubjective experiences without the requirement that interacting persons be co-present in the same place and interact at the same time. Individuals can appropriate the affordances of socio-technical system not only maintain a functional communicative relationship with other individuals but also to build an empathetic social relationship. However, interacting through technology isn't fully satisfying and creates a desire for the social phenomenological richness of the face-to-face meetings. In our view, e-participation is no exception to this tendency to seek richer face-to-face meetings and not be limited to just online social ties. It is increasingly the case that online social ties will lead to the creation of offline real-world social bonds.

In the context of political blogging in the USA, based on our observations, we can say that the Internet is actually revitalizing offline associations and community life. For example, the Daily Kos blog community consists of bloggers, diarists, commentators, and lurkers. For the past few years, the Daily Kos blog community along with other progressive blogging communities has organized

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offline conferences called "Netroots Nation"[1] (formerly called "YearlyKos") to meet face-to-face. Similarly, the Eschaton blog community which was the analytical focus of the virtual ethnographic study presented in this paper, meets offline at a conference called "Eschacon"[2]. Further, members of the liberal blogging community can meet offline at one of the "Drinking Liberally"[3] local chapters. Drinking Liberally self-describes itself, somewhat tongue-in cheek, as "promoting democracy one pint at a time" and self-reports "40 chapters in 45 states." This is an interesting analogue to Habermas' "structural transformation of the public sphere" which first describes the emergence of the public sphere from English salons, German table corners, and French cafes. It is too early to add American bars to the list of physical spaces above. However, emerging empirical research does indicate that Internet-based forms of participation and engagement in the USA are creating offline face-to-face bonds. It was the print media that was the technological bedrock for the emergence of Habermasian public sphere. Early indications point to the Internet media as providing the technological capabilities for the emergence of a mixed reality public sphere. Fluid identities between online and offline worlds are leading to a hybrid identity which when taken together with a mixed reality public sphere holds exciting action possibilities. However, this is admittedly a very early period in the evolution of these mixed-reality places and systematic empirical studies are needed to ascertain the civic benefits of these developments.

5.4 When, where and why is internet activity in civil society having an impact on public policies?

Our virtual ethnographic study doesn't directly address this issue. However, in our observations, we do see political blogs operating as activists and advocates for issues of concern. In other words, political blogs do act and function as political agents. Many political blogs seek to empower the "net roots" and issue calls for campaign funding contributions, voter registration, and voter mobilization. On the key legislative issues, political blogs like Daily Kos and Eschaton encourage their community members to contact their representatives on issues of concern. However, we do not yet know empirically how effective these activities are in impacting actual public policies.

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1 http://www.netrootsnation.org/

2 http://eschacon08.blogspot.com/

3 http://drinkingliberally.org/

5.5 How do trends at different levels (local, national, European and international) compare? Is civil society's use of e-participation a homogeneous trend or is it a politically localized phenomenon?

Speaking from the USA standpoint, political blogging is infused with a productive dialectic of the local and the global. The formation of new public imaginaries and virtual publics is a case in point (Gaonkar, 2002; Rodman, 2003; Saco, 2002; Taylor, 2002; Warner, 2002). However, given the digital divide and differential gaps in digital literacy, we must critically investigate the societal implications of the e-participation possibilities engendered by the Internet. To paraphrase what Seymour Papert (1987) has said in the context of educational technology, we should engage in "technology criticism" and not be limited by "techno centric thinking" in studying these emergent trends. In the case of political blogs, as we said earlier, there is a danger they can evolve into partisan community spheres that perpetuate a particular political ideology instead of providing places for critical civic engagement. It might be the case that e-democracy, e-governance, and e-participation are incompatible discursive modes of enunciation. In our opinion, this is an open empirical question that needs to be systematically studied.

6 Acknowledgements

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Framing Issues, Fomenting Change, 'Feministing': A Contemporary Feminist Blog in the Landscape of Online Political Activism

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Abstract. The practice and popularity of blogging, as a particular form of online activism, has exploded in recent years, leading to a burgeoning field of scholarship on its implications for mainstream media discourse. As one of the most visited feminist blogs on the internet and recent winner of the 2007 Bloggers Choice Award for Best Political Blog, Feministing stands at the epicenter of debates around the politics of third-wave feminism and online activism. In this paper, I argue that Feministing, through employing third-wave feminist strategies, contributes to substantially reshaping conventional political discourse though has yet to exert direct influence on politics or policy. As blogs continue to grow in number and impact, these findings are essential in shaping the way we interpret discursive strategies and their ultimate effect on activist outcomes. I examine Feministing's origins, community, discursive strategies, and outcomes as these relate to the broader fields of blogging and online activism. Utilizing a distinctly feminist methodology, I draw on diverse types of third-wave feminist literature while also exploring blogging through popular and academic sources. Moreover, I reinforce the prominent feminist notion that 'the personal is political' throughout, most notably by drawing on my own experiences as a reader of Feministing.

1 Introduction

As the recent winner of the Bloggers Choice Award for "Best Political Blog 2007", Feministing[1] stands at the epicenter of the contemporary political phenomena of online activism and third-wave feminist identity politics. On Feministing, feminism and activism work in tandem: the writers' and readers' own feminist identities translate into in a form of online political activism which has been both critiqued and lauded in media and academic sources. Focusing on the debate surrounding the effectiveness of online political activism, this paper will place Feministing within the larger contexts of third-wave ideology and the so-called blog revolution. Through a review of academic literature as well as popular sources, in this paper I will argue that the blog Feministing, through employing third-wave feminist ideology and strategies, contributes to substantially reshaping conventional political discourse, though has yet to exert direct influence on politics or policy.

In the last several years, blogs and blogging have become a staple of online political activism. A web log, or blog, is a webpage with periodic, reverse chronologically ordered content, posted by an individual or group. Depending on the writers, updates on blogs can range from extremely frequent to very infrequent. The blogging phenomenon is so recent that the formal language we use to describe it has only just developed: in 2004, 'blog' was Merriam-Webster's word of the year, meaning it was the online site's most looked-up word that year (Su, Wang, & Mark, 2005). In the following year, Merriam-Webster included "blog" in its paper edition for the first time. Given the cutting-edge nature of this dimension of internet media, few major academic articles exist on blogging's influence and implications, although scholarship on the issue is burgeoning. This paper aims to contribute to a body of literature which is currently unfolding, one that is vital in shaping our understanding of emerging internet medias and their impact – real and potential – on broader political systems and structures.

Through focusing on Feministing in particular, I fold into this analysis of blog activism the third-wave feminist strategies and rhetoric utilized on Feministing, which themselves function as a type of political activism. Through their modes of reporting, the content selected for the site, and their links to other blogs and organizations, we see the emergence of Feministing's distinctive third-wave approach. The course of my argument follows the third-wave strategies found on Feministing and evaluates the scope of this form of activism. As Feministing receives accolades for its status as a political blog (and as the nature of feminism has remained enduringly political since its conception) exploring the ways in which third-wave feminism both promotes and impedes broader political activism stands as an essential task most relevant to activist developments online. Through examining one of the most popular feminist internet sites, I intend to also

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1 www.feministing.com

contribute to the feminist literature that probes questions about the nature of activist movements, linking them to the most contemporary platform for activism: the internet and its media.

In this introduction, I will offer a brief description of how I understood third-wave feminism in this paper, followed by a section outlining my personal motivations for this particular project. My paper will then turn to the origins of Feministing, linking its specific impetus with the broader structural motivations of the blogging movement, which resulted in the current explosion of blogging as a political medium. From here, I explore third-wave feminism's explicit connection to blogging, thus contextualizing Feministing's beginnings within a wider framework that particularly emphasizes online activism as an extension of third-wave feminism. Next, I examine issues of community and related questions of inclusion, both within third-wave feminism and internet technologies.

A section on the strategies employed by Feministing to accomplish its political objectives will follow, explaining the nature of its language, tone, and content as embodying characteristics of third-wave feminism. Finally, a section on the ultimate outcomes of Feministing examines how its activism is both effective and not so, ultimately concluding that largely because of its utilization of third-wave strategies and ideology, Feministing has contributed to reshaping how we imagine political discourse, but has failed to directly influence politics or policy.

2 Third-Wave Feminism in Context

Because this paper addresses third-wave feminism in its evaluation of the blog Feministing, it is important to understand upfront to what I refer by this term. As authors such as Henry (2004), Hooks (2000), and Baumgardner and Richards (2000) have noted, third-wave feminism can be understood both as a generational indicator (targeting young women) and as an ideology distinctive from other waves of feminism. The complexities and overlap between these two interpretations of third-wave feminism result in diverse and complex understandings of the term.

Importantly, I envision third-wave feminism as an ideology and not a structured movement; "An ideology without a movement", as articulated by E. Ann Kaplan at a 2002 conference (Gillis & Munford, 2003). Rather that forming a nationalized, unified, and highly mobilized social or political movement, Henry (2004) argues that "third wave feminism is more about textual and cultural production, local forms of activism, and a particular form of feminist consciousness than it is a large-scale social justice movement" (p. 43). From this perspective, I view third-wave feminism as spurring diverse movements based on its fundamental ideology, but not as constituting a movement on its own.

For the purposes of this paper's case study on Feminsting, I have identified two main frames through which to view the third wave: the nature of its community

and its use of particular strategies. In exploring the third-wave nature of these, it is helpful to broadly define third-wave feminism in contrast to its predecessors, first- and second-wave feminism. As Alfonso and Trigilio (1997) explain, first- and second-wave feminism were marked by large, distinct activist movements, in the respective areas of women's suffrage (first-wave), and the deconstruction of sex roles and struggle for equal rights (second-wave). Like other feminist scholars, they argue that no similarly large, distinguishable movement characterizes third-wave feminism, but rather that it is marked by postmodernist constructions of identity and of the individual (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997).

Other scholars, including Bailey (1997) and Garrison (2000), agree that third-wave feminism is generally defined in negative terms; that is, it defines itself by negating certain traits of first- and second-wave feminism rather than embracing its own. Virtually all of the themes addressed in this literature review are components of what third-wave feminism rejects: for example, an emphasis on intersectionality affirms the multi-dimensionality of identity and the inherent value of diverse identities, and therefore discards the dominance in other waves of monolithic constructions of identity and the dominance of white, upper-class women as agents of the movements. Likewise, the popularity among the third wave movement of subverting the dominant paradigm (patriarchy) in highly visible, public ways and utilizing popular conduits to do so (mass media, pop culture, etc.) moves the feminist agenda out of the ivory tower and onto the streets, thereby rejecting earlier premiums on formal, academic feminism (Hooks, 2000).

Even if born out of a rejection of past standards of feminism, scholars agree that certain broad themes compose the pillars of third-wave feminism. In recognizing these widely accepted theoretical components, scholars point out, it is important to note their decentralized nature as opposed to the hierarchical, structured movements of feminism in the past (Hooks, 2000). With no organized, concrete list of objectives, Alfonso and Trigilio (1997) report that third wave feminism acts through disseminated, variable sites and methods. This conceptual framework will inform the discussion of third-wave feminism throughout this paper.

3 Personal Motivations

As a third-wave feminist and online activist, understanding online activism through third-wave ideology held both personal and academic significance for me. As I received emailed copies of Thomas Friedman's recent notorious column on "Generation Q"[1] through my various networks online – usually accompanied with frustrated remarks – I began to think more analytically about the cumulative

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1 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/10/opinion/10friedman.html

outcome of my own avenues of activism: all the online petitions I'd signed, the blogs I read and commented on, email lists to which I subscribed. Through analyzing one of my favorite websites, one that is both feminist and activist, I hope to address some of these very timely questions through a probing academic lens, thereby gaining personal insight into my own strategies and methods of activism.

4 Origins

To date, the blog Feministing receives about 100,000 unique visitors per month, marking it as one of the internet's most popular US feminist blogs (Cochrane, 2006). In operation since April 2004, the site's contributors blog daily on a wide array of issues and news items from a feminist perspective, often encouraging specific action such as emailing complaints to companies or contacting legislators.

In Feministing's first blog post, creator Jessica Valenti (2004) wrote,

> Too often, young women's voices aren't heard, whether it's in school, in the media, or at the dinner table. But most importantly, our input is absent where it matters most: on issues that affect us directly. … Feministing will be an interactive space for young women to stay on top of the news and issues that affect us, and to exchange thoughts and ideas with each other. It's time for women of our generation to have their chance and a place to make their voices heard.

Valenti described the motivations of her blog as a reaction to the mainstream perception of young women as apathetic and disassociating with feminism. "That was all we ever seemed to hear – from colleagues, from the media. And we just thought, who are they talking about? I know young women all over the place who do feminist work." A lot of feminism has this academic base that can be off-putting. And so we thought, let's put something out there that's not dry and academic, but lively and fun" (Cochrane, 2006, p. 1). Indeed, Feministing's mission statement echoes these thoughts, describing the site as "a platform for us [young women] to comment, analyze, and *influence*" (Feministing, 2004). As third-wave feminist writers like Walker (1995) and Henry (2004) have recounted, third-wave feminism is distinctly and inherently political in nature, yet not claimed by any specific group or political party. Consequently, Feministing first emerged as a distinctively political blog with aims rooted in creating awareness and serving as a platform for commentary on broad political issues.

Paralleling Valenti's motivations to start Feministing, it is widely thought in both academic and popular literature that this same sort of alienation from the mainstream originally spurred the rise of blogs more generally. In their survey of the differences between political and personal blogs, Su, Wang, and Mark (2005) charted the reasons bloggers and readers preferred a particular kind of blog. In their discussion on reader motivations, they observe that

> Political blogs also provide a forum for discussion on topics that are expected to be political. Such forums can be especially valuable for people who feel alienated from the dominant

culture and feel that there are scarce channels to express themselves. Through expression in a blog, one can align oneself with like-minded people though one's local community may express contrary views (p. 12).

Lakshmi Chaudry (2006) similarly observes that alienation most certainly birthed the political blogosphere. She explains further that, "The galvanizing cause for the rapid proliferation of political blogs and their mushrooming audience was a deep disillusionment across the political spectrum with traditional media—a disillusionment accentuated by a polarized political landscape" (Chaudry, 2006).

Judging from Valenti's comments on the impetus for Feministing, Chaudry's observation rings eminently true. Further, in 2004, the Bush administration's so-called "War on Women" (signifying an anti-women agenda such as decreasing social services spending and anti-reproductive rights policy) waged on, which in combination with the US's conservative hangover from 9/11 created an especially hostile media environment for feminists and feminism (Flanders, 2004). Through situating Feministing within the general blog movement's origins, as well as the political context of the era of its creation, we see the complex, alienating factors at work which ultimately resulted in this alternative space for feminist news and politics.

4.1 Women and Blogging: Extensions of the Third Wave

The emergence of Feministing must be contextualized by the larger gender trends shaping the blogosphere. In an article on female blogging, *Herizons* magazine reported from blogher.com, a site that promotes blogging among women, that 55% of current bloggers are female (Watt, 2006). They also observe that women start more blogs than men and are more likely to keep them going for a longer time (Watt, 2006). *In These Times* reported that in 2006 women and people of color constituted the fastest-growing segment of the blogosphere—a trend which reflects Feministing's growing audience and reach on the web (Chaudry, 2006). However, in spite of these encouraging statistics, female bloggers remain less visible on the internet: only two of the top ten most visited blogs are women's (Watt, 2006).

In explanation, researcher Melissa Gregg (2006) posits that the content of women's blogs may be "perceived by some to be less noteworthy than men's, by nature of their often domestic and personal sphere of reference, whereas men's blogs are often seen to be more engaged in political debate, especially when the notion of what counts as political remains undefined" (p. 85). This last point is especially relevant to Feministing. While the writers often refer to their personal spheres of reference, the site's content is overwhelmingly political in nature. This pairing creates a dynamic fully in line with third-wave feminist politics, but one that others may question due to contestations about what constitutes the 'politics'. As Gregg (2006) sums up: "Generalizations therefore serve to confirm ingrained notions as to the proper participants in, and issues appropriate for, the public

sphere," (p. 85) which thereby implicitly limit women's contributions in this arena. This appears to be a challenge Feministing has been relatively successful at overcoming, considering their recent Best Political Blog win.

In Cochrane's (2006) article, interviews with feminist bloggers indicate blogging (and associated forms of online activism) as unique to third-wave feminism, distinguishing it from previous waves which lacked availability of such technology. Feministing creator Valenti, remarks that "There's always been this sense among second-wave feminists that young women just aren't interested. That's never been true though: they just didn't know how to reach us" (Cochrane, 2006). Likewise, Rebecca Traister (2004) of Salon.com's women's blog Broadsheet comments that

> People are always saying the feminist movement is dead, but I've never believed that. What I think is that it's taking a modern, technological form, and that, from now on, feminism will be about a multiplicity of voices, growing louder and louder online… There are so many authentic voices out there that it's really invigorating.

Tellingly, Traister says that if a young woman asked her about feminism, she'd point her to the blogosphere (Cohrane, 2006). Given this evidence, even as negative gendered stereotypes have so far prevented many women's blogs from gaining popular and critical attention, Feministing belongs within a burgeoning feminist blogging movement which employs particular third-wave strategies to engage readers politically.

5 Community: Who is an activist on Feministing?

In this portion of the paper, I refer to the broad community that is associated with Feministing, either through writing posts, commenting, reading, or linking to the site. Out of the diverse and plentiful literature on third wave feminism emerges the concept of intersectionality, essential to an analysis of Feministing's community. Intersectionality gives insight into who is included in the Feministing community and, because the blog's content is naturally written by and for this community, for whom the content is written.

Questions of inclusion within internet media on a broader, global scale logically follow this discussion of the politics of community on Feministing. After a brief review of the literature representing both sides of these debates, I will place Feministing within this broader context of accessibility.

5.1 Community on Feministing

The current seven contributors to Feministing are all young women under 30 who write for the site without financial compensation. They are writers and activists by trade, working for such organizations as NARAL Pro-Choice America and writing for sites like Alternet.org, as well as publishing books such as *Full-*

Frontal Feminism and *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*. Jessica Valenti, Vanessa Valenti, Jen Moseley, Celina de Leon, Samhita Mukhopadhyay, Courtney Martin, and Ann Friedman represent various ethnicities; three of the seven are women of color. Further, several of the women speak of working-class backgrounds. All are college graduates and at least half hold or are working towards graduate degrees in Women and Gender studies (Feministing, 2007).

Unfortunately, it is difficult (or perhaps impossible) to track or interview the readership of Feministing, considering the anonymity screen names afford commenters and the constant flux of readers. From anecdotal evidence, it seems as if a majority of Feministing's readers are young, un-married women either in college, graduate school, or early in their careers. Certainly, older women also contribute to conversations on the site, often declaring their status as "second wavers" and expounding on their life experience as it pertains to a certain issue. It is also important to note that feminist men comprise an active part of Feministing's readership, often commenting on posts they agree or disagree with and making their gender identity known.

Another aspect of Feministing's community is represented in the blogroll listed on the site, which is the list of blogs Feministing supports and to which they provide links. Most are feminist sites or written by people who identify as feminist, with a special emphasis on blogs written by women of color and blogs tackling issues relating to identity, whether racial, sexual, or gender-oriented. All of these components of Feministing's community – writers, readers, and the blogroll – point to a third-wave understanding of intersectionality.

5.2 Academic Literature on Intersectionality

By intersectionality, most scholars refer to the conceptual practice of maintaining and experiencing multiple identities in the context of multiple, larger systems of oppression (Bailey, 1997). Intersectionality calls for all people to recognize their inherent dual roles as both oppressed and oppressor, and for identity to be acknowledged as situated in the interstices of these opposing identities and roles (Bailey, 1997 and Hooks, 2000). Practically, this most salient aspect of third-wave feminism means that, rather than incorporating traditionally unrepresented women (women of color, homosexual women, working-class women, disabled women, etc.) into existing ideology, third-wave feminism seeks to fundamentally alter its ideology based on the multi-layered identities held by all women (Henry, 2004). An intersectional analysis involves undertaking larger structural change of the movement, as informed by this new, problematized and complicated version of identity (Alfonso and Trigilio, 1997).

Rebecca Walker (1995) famously characterizes third-wave feminism's surge towards an inclusive ideal, with complex models of identity. In her book, a series of essays sheds a third-wave light on everything from motherhood to sex work. Writing on Walker's book, Bailey (1997) observes that "The diversity of voices

that arise from younger feminists, whether they call themselves members of the third wave or not, can be expected to complicate and enrich feminism… Complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction can enrich our identities as individual feminists and the movement as a whole" (p. 26).

Noted feminist intellectual and cultural critic Bell Hooks (2000) features intersectional analyses as a crucial component of her work. Hooks argues that sexism, racism, classism, capitalism, and colonialism in the US promote oppression by idealizing oppressive values and characteristics. Most important here is her acknowledgement and inclusion of varying types of oppression, and the implicit understanding that women may experience any or all of these oppressions, thereby more accurately reflecting individual identity. Significantly, Hooks (2000) critiques the increased entry of white, upper-class women into the workforce by claiming their gains in the corporate realm do not reflect overall success for the feminist movement in gaining greater economic power. Rather, the corporate successes for a relatively few women, and parallel success attributed to feminism, point to the co-option of feminism by capitalism, and more importantly, the division of women's interests along class and racial lines. In this way, Hooks emphasizes power struggles within a third-wave feminist movement. Furthermore, Hooks attributes multiple, complex, and shifting identities to all women, showing how these often translate to struggles between well-educated, wealthy women and less privileged women.

The concept of intersectionality functions on Feministing. In addition to the diverse group of writers, Feministing's blogroll represents a spectrum of perspectives and identities, some explicitly labeled from the outset, such as the blog AngryBrownButch[1]. The content posted on Feministing further reflects the writers' intersectional understanding of feminism. A feature of the website, Saturday Interviews[2], consistently selects traditionally under-represented women for interviews, such as Tiona M., a black lesbian film producer who just finished a documentary on lesbians of African descent living in the U.S. Other recent interviews have included Tatiana Suarez Pico, Tara Lopez, and Aurin Squire, who collectively produce a comic strip about growing up in Brooklyn, titled "Bodega Ave." Routine blog posts often reflect distinct anti-racist as well as feminist themes: Feministing documented the Jena, Louisiana crimes and the subsequent national reaction, as well as the Megan Williams case in West Virginia, in which a young black woman was tortured and raped by white men. Moreover, news items on civil unions and gay rights are frequently critiqued and posted. In all of these ways, the community and content on Feministing represent an understanding of the role intersectionality plays in third-wave feminism.

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1 http://www.angrybrownbutch.com/

2 http://www.feministing.com/interviews/

5.3 Debates of Internet Accessibility

With the emergence of the internet has come constructed paradigms through which we have come to understand this new medium and its implications. One familiar internet paradigm is that it functions as a democratizing force, evening the proverbial playing field by allowing users to participate in political discourse and social activism like never before. Another paradigm (which doesn't necessarily stand in direct opposition with the later but simply adds another dimension to it) is that the internet is characterized by a digital divide which favors the wealthy, developed, English-speaking parts of the world at the expense of billions of people who either lack access to the internet, the material resources needed to procure access, or the knowledge of how to negotiate the two.

Since Feministing maintains a largely North American-based readership, these global questions of access may not apply directly to the site, although the systems and structures which create the digital divide are certainly at work in the US. These exclusive factors determine what kinds of women are able to access, read, and contribute to the site (for example, women working three jobs may not have time for the site, or women in isolated areas may lack the social capital or know-how necessary for first accessing the site).

Certainly, questions of intersectionality become folded into these debates. Although definitive answers to these essential questions are impossible to know and document in this paper, as we explore the political nature and impacts of Feministing, it is crucial to conceptually incorporate intersectionality into debates around access and community. As a way to sum up the debates around how internet accessibility, Coleman writes, "If there are democratic claims to be made for the internet, their realization is closely linked to the capacity of ordinary people to enter, shape, and govern it to a greater extent than with any previous communication medium. It is as an extension of media freedom that blogging should be taken seriously" (p. 280). Indeed, these issues profoundly affect Feministing and its readership.

6 Strategies: How does Feministing accomplish its goals?

This section will explore the areas of language, content, and analytical scope as they relate to third-wave strategies employed at Feministing. The content of the blog ranges from media analysis, to political commentary, to frustrated rants about pop culture. Posts address diverse topics in an engaging and witty way. News items such as the increasing gendered wage gap in the UK, the US

Congress repealing the Global Gag Rule[1] imposed by President Bush, and the conservative cultural phenomenon of promise rings[2] are covered with insight into their meaning for women everywhere, communicated by believable language which includes slang and curse words.

In a discussion of strategies, it is important to note that the language employed by Feministing writers functions specifically (intentionally or not) to move perceptions of feminism and feminist thought away from the academic realm and into the popular, a broadly recognized pillar of third-wave feminist ideology (Hooks, 2000 and Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997). As Valenti remarked in an interview, "A lot of feminism has this academic base that can be off-putting. And so we thought, let's put something out there that's not dry and academic, but lively and fun" (Cochrane, 2006). These following examples of posts and the language utilized show how feminist thought is expressed in what seems an everyday conversational tone.

A debacle at Southwest Airlines has earned many posts in recent weeks, which encouraged visitors to take action by emailing their comments directly to Southwest. The incidents in question involved the airline ordering two different female passengers to change out of their clothes, which were deemed to be too revealing and distracting to other passengers, in order to remain on their scheduled flights. Both women complied at the time of the requests, but now at least one of them is suing Southwest on the basis of discrimination. Feministing bloggers included a picture of one of the woman in the offending clothes: "*Scandalous*, no?," they mock. "How dare she walk around in 100-degree weather wearing that?!" (A. Friedman, 2007).

Many posts on Feministing critique the mainstream media's perpetuation of gender stereotypes and, in particular, the pervasive hypersexualization of women. Recently, Feministing bloggers linked to an article in Britain's *Daily Mail* which featured a male reporter's account of "being female" for a day, which he achieved by shaving his legs, talking about relationships, buying women's magazines, and cleaning his house. "So did Michelson take a pay cut and endure street harassment? Balance work and family?" Valenti (2007a) asks. "I'm a woman, and if my life was composed of that inane bullshit, I'd kill someone," writes a commenter.

Finally, in addition to its blogroll, the site also features sidebars which provide myriad links to all sources of information and news about women and feminism.

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1 Officially termed the Mexico City Policy, the Gag Rule – so termed because it limits free speech on abortion-related issues – is a set of restrictions that mandate that no U.S. family planning funding can be provided to foreign NGOs that perform abortions in cases other than a threat to the woman's life, rape or incest; provide counseling and referral for abortion; or lobby to make abortion legal or more available in their country.

2 In this context, promise rings refer to rings given to daughters by their fathers or religious leaders which are to be worn until the time of marriage and symbolize the young woman's commitment to abstinence until that time.

The sidebar displays a list of progressively-minded, if not explicitly feminist blogs, ranging from more established players like Racewire, an offshoot of *Colorlines* magazine, and Margaret Cho, the famed feminist comedienne, to grassroots projects like Tennessee Guerilla Women, a group of progressive, radical women whose blog works to "raise the voices of Tennessee women".[1] Feministing's sidebar also includes a list of news sources, once again running the gamut from the relatively well-known – Ms. Magazine, UN Women Watch – to the edgier or more politically radical like Alternet.org and Bitch Magazine. Other categories of links include women's organizations, violence against women, work, legal organizations, reproductive rights, international, political, and women's studies programs. Notably, Feministing seems to make a conscious effort to include widely varying types of blogs, news sources, and organizations, mirroring the site's commitment to all types of news and analysis.

6.1 Pop Culture and Gender Analysis on Feministing

Feministing's bloggers declare in interviews their commitment to reaching the widest possible audience by injecting their brand of feminism into every type of news item and cultural event. As Hooks (2000) speaks of moving feminism out of the academic realm and into the streets, on Feministing, everything is up for debate: the mainstream, the grassroots, the academic, the pop culture—all are represented and critiqued on the blog. Here, I look at two components of this broad focus, pop culture and broad gender analysis (versus women's issues), as they relate to overarching strategies to engage people of all backgrounds and identities.

Feministing's posts which pertain to recent pop cultural phenomenon or events, such as advertising campaigns and new music, are particularly helpful in situating the site within the broader landscape of online political activism. Taking on such topics as mainstream TV and movies positions the site as a conduit of third-wave feminist activism, targeting a young, progressive, third-wave audience, which concerns itself with a wider scope of political analysis.

Further, third-wave feminism aims to be as inclusive as possible, and in fact intentionally reach out to non-traditional audiences with its broad arc of observation and critique. Pop culture analysis, as observed on Feministing, serves an important role in this process. Hooks (In Valenti, 2007c) explained the intersections between pop culture and intellectual analysis during a New York University conference on media, in a presentation entitled "Cultural criticism and Transformation: Why study pop culture?":

> With my students from different class backgrounds and ethnicities…I found continually that if I took a movie, and said well, did you go see this movie? How did you think about? And if I related something very concrete in pop culture to the kind of theoretical paradigms I was trying

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1 http://guerillawomentn.blogspot.com/

to share with them, people seemed to grasp it more and it became much more exciting and interesting for everyone. Popular culture has that power in everyday life. Whether we're talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it's where the learning is. [It's] the primary pedagogical medium for masses of people globally who wanted to understand the politics of difference.

As previously detailed, Feministing bloggers regularly critique and otherwise comment on mainstream media and popular culture. Both *The Slate* and *Daily Mail* posts are examples. Others include recent posts on a female actress calling her new movie sexist, and offensive advertising campaigns which objectify women's bodies.

In addition to pop culture analysis, coverage of broad gender issues widens the scope of analysis on Feministing. Within third-wave ideology, conceptions of feminism as engaging or affecting only women, common in the first and second waves, are rebutted by an emphasis on 'gender dynamics' rather than 'women's issues'. This shift in approach has manifested itself not only in Women's and Gender Studies class (and department) titles and curricula content, but even in the upper echelons of global and national governance. Speaking to this and describing what she perceives as a definable new phase of feminism, Gayatri Spivak (2000) observes that this shift is reflected in the change of inter-governmental organizations' jargon: we now hear of "gender and development" rather than the older "women in development." On more local levels, the conceptual shift to broader, more inclusive gender analysis means engaging men in social welfare programs and community initiatives, and soliciting their input in gender publications, forums, and networks. By way of explaining the roots of this broader scope of analysis, Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) make clear how third-wave feminism is complicated by a quickly shifting and ever-complex reality, which distinguishes it from prior waves. They explain that "We no longer live in the world that feminists of the second wave faced", they write; instead, we live in, "a world of global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism, and environmental degradation…[we] are therefore concerned not simply with 'women's issues' but with a broad range of interlocking topics" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003, 14).

On Feministing, this shifted and broadened focus on gender issues becomes apparent through blog posts on a wide spectrum of gender-related issues, and not only those traditionally affecting primarily women, such as birth control, child care, and equal pay battles. Posts follow news stories which represent the broad spectrum of gender and sexual identities and every imaginable related topic: legal updates on civil unions, environmental notices affecting reproductive health, and, recently, a new book out on pornography and its adverse affect on masculinity. In accounting for Feministing's wide scope of analysis as represented in its pop culture content and broad gender focus, Feministing contributor Courtney Martin remarked,

I think that Feministing is representative of third wave feminism in the way that it approaches a global range of serious issues in a personal, often humorous, and sometimes outraged way. I also think it's representative in the sense that it mixes pop culture critiques with hard-and-fast news summaries. We prove that young women care about a whole range of things and want to process through entertaining, uplifting critique, not totally depressing, supposedly "objective" news (Martin, 2007).

As Martin observes, Feministing's content, language, and tone all draw on third-wave conceptions of community and commentary to accomplish the blog's goals of stimulating discourse and including a diverse array of people within its readership.

7 Outcomes: What is the political activist force of a blog like Feministing?

The course of this paper has so far covered the origins of Feministing and the broader blogging phenomenon, the nature of the blog's community and debates of accessibility around the internet itself, and finally, the ways Feministing's strategies work to achieve its goals. All of these various segments of the argument ultimately determine the activist outcomes of Feministing. This section explores how various sources – both academic and popular – evaluate the activist potential of blogs, and how these findings relate specifically to Feministing. Here, I approach arguments in the framework of 'quiet' activism (Thomas Friedman's term for ineffective virtual activism) versus echoing activism, borrowed from scholars who believe blogs constitute an important "echo chamber" for politics and activism.

7.1 'Quiet' Activism?

In a recent opinion column in the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman criticized various forms of online activism as mere "quiet" activism which did not translate to off-line developments. The column was the most e-mailed article on the Times' website for over a week, and Friedman received much attention, both good and bad, from other publications and journalists for his remarks. In the column, entitled "Generation 'Q'", Friedman remarks he's "impressed because they're [college students] much more optimistic and idealistic than they should be. I am baffled because they are so much less radical and politically engaged than they need to be" (Friedman, 2007). He goes on to reflect on how engaged he sees students as being, whether working in New Orleans or for Teach for America, but Generation Q "quietly pursu[es] their idealism, at home and abroad … Generation Q may be too quiet, too online, for its own good, and for the country's own good" (Friedman, 2007). In assessing online activism, Friedman (2007) writes:

America needs a jolt of the idealism, activism and outrage (it must be in there) of Generation Q. But they can't e-mail it in, and an online petition or a mouse click for carbon neutrality won't cut it. … Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy didn't change the world by asking people to join their Facebook crusades or to download their platforms. Activism can only be uploaded, the old-fashioned way — by young voters speaking truth to power, face to face, in big numbers, on campuses or the Washington Mall. Virtual politics is just that — virtual.

In this excerpt, we see the crux of Friedman's argument: being online, no matter how active, won't cut it in the "real world"; young online activists must close down their laptops and pick up picketing signs.

It seems natural that few scholars who research blogs would agree with his claims, given that they've deemed blogging important enough to pursue as a research topic. But some do recount the weaknesses of the blogging sphere and online activism in their work, just as many mainstream journalistic sources openly question the impact of the medium. In Drezner and Farrell's (2004) important work, they recount upfront the limited readership of blogs as measured by mainstream media and more technical surveys. Compared to other political actors, such as specialized interest groups, political action committees, government bureaucrats, and the mainstream media, blogging holds little relative power or visibility; even the most popular blog receives only a fraction of the web traffic that major media outlets attract (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). An article in the *New York Times* concluded, "Never have so many people written so much to be read by so few" (Hafner, 2004).

One particularly cited study performed by the Perseus Development Corporation claimed that of the 4.12 million new blogs since the birth of the medium in 1999, less than 50,000 are actually updated and maintained. "The typical blog is written by a teenage girl who uses it twice a month to update her friends and classmates on happenings in her life. It will be written very informally," the study finds (Henning, 2003). Graham (2001) experienced similar results in producing his blog: "Total circulation: Two. Mom. Dad" he describes (p. 35). Such studies and articles discount the otherwise pervasive notion that blogs are revolutionizing communication. "Let's get this straight. Blogging is not a revolution" claims Talbot (2001, p. 130). He likens blogs to the short-lived internet phenomenon GeoCities, a collection of personal web pages, in that they're "badly built and ill-conceived" (Talbot, 2001, p. 131). Further, instead of celebrating increased access to publishing of information and commentary, Talbot (2001) argues that many such publishers, or bloggers, are not informed enough to make worthwhile contributions, thereby simply adding to the "junk" found on the internet.

Returning to the potential activist power of online activism, particularly through blogs, remains an elusive and difficult question. While Feministing writer Martin believes commenters like Friedman "underestimate the conversation going on online", she also admits he may be "spot on in terms of how this conversation usually doesn't translate to social action and risk-taking… It's a little too easy to

sit in front of your computer and feel like that equals involvement I worry about the fundamental link to political action. I think we are still straining to figure out how to make Feministing a site that leads to real civic engagement. It's important to all of us" (Martin, 2007). Journalism on feminism and blogging similarly reports that the links between feminist blogs and off-line activism are only "nascent" and "emerging" (Watt, 2006). Overall, this line of critique focuses on blogs' limited readership, lack of overall professionalism, and weak connection to off-line activist efforts.

7.2 Or Echoing Activism?

The clear majority of scholarship on blogs declares their power to alter political discourse and inform mainstream media sources. The question then becomes whether these outcomes comprise an important type of activism, as real as, say, Friedman's visions of anti-Vietnam marching. Hewitt (2005), a law professor and zealous advocate of blogging, begins by critiquing the Perseus study. Even if only 50,000 blogs are updated daily, he says, a change from zero blogs in 1999 to 50,000 active blogs in 2005 constitutes the entrance of a meaningful new internet medium. Again in rebuttal to studies like Perseus, scholars argue that it does not matter how many people read blogs but, rather, who reads them. And, as Drezner and Farrell (2004) find, powerful and influential individuals in the mainstream political and media fields rely on blogs for new information and grassroots commentary.

Bloggers' ability to influence mainstream media coverage is one most salient aspect of their activist potential. In his analysis, Friedman apparently overlooked that many of his peers refer to blogs in order to chart up-and-coming news stories, or what people are interested in talking about. Drezner and Farrell (2004) report that prominent journalists from *New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times*, *ABC News*, *Newsweek* and *Time* indicate that blogs comprise part of their information-gathering activities (p. 14). Another indicator of the connections between mainstream media and blogging is the crossover of writers from one to the other: notably, Noam Chomsky has given blogging a shot, while bloggers like Mickey Kaus and Andrew Sullivan have been hired by mainstream media companies to analyze and comment (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). Even further, mainstream sites have acknowledged the power and popularity of blogging by instituting their own blogs on their sites. Newspapers with blogs include *Chicago Tribune, Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Guardian*, while the websites of *Fox News*, *ABC News*, and *MSNBC* also host blogs (Drezner & Farrell, 2004).

Through influential readership, the crossover between blogging and mainstream journalism, and the incorporation of blogs into mainstream news sites, blog content affects mainstream media coverage. Drezner and Farrell (2004) conclude that bloggers' activist outcomes are "less important because of their direct effects on politics than their indirect ones: they influence important actors

within mainstream media who in turn frame issues for a wider public…they have a first-mover advantage in socially constructing these interpretive frames for understanding current events ” (p. 23). This has recently proved true for Feministing when Fox News covered a recent post criticizing girls’ underwear being sold at Wal-Mart imprinted with the phrase “Who needs credit cards?”. Due in part to Feministing readers’ emails and the Fox News coverage, Wal-Mart removed the underwear from their shelves days after the Feministing post. In this very timely example, we see how blogs can succeed in framing issues for the mainstream media and how, considering Wal-Mart’s actions, this can directly translate to real-life activism.

Scholars also discuss the advantages blogging maintains over more conventional media sources, and how this enhances their potential for activism. DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) highlight the versatility of the blogging medium. They argue that by integrating different kinds of content (like text, audio, video, visual images) forms of communication embedded in internet technology “will be implicated in many kinds of social change, perhaps more deeply than television or radio” (p. 308). Kahn and Kaplan (2003) agree that new internet technologies like blogs constitute a fundamentally new type of communication. They suggest that blog technology “makes possible a reconfiguring of politics, a refocusing of politics on everyday life” (p. 3) which figures in their conclusion that “to a meaningful extent, the new information and communication technologies are revolutionary, they do constitute a revolution of everyday life being presently enacted by internet subcultures [i.e. blogging]” (p. 3). Feministing, of course, utilizes all the diverse types of content referred to by DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) and, through its focus on everyday topics like pop culture, certainly reconfigures politics to include a wider scope of political analysis.

Finally, scholars like Coleman (2005) and Kahn and Kaplan (2003) connect blogging’s activist impact to the way the practice subverts the dominant media paradigm. As they point out, mainstream media maintains the structure of provider/consumer, in that editors and journalists produce news for a wide audience, and non-journalists consume the news via these mainly corporate sources. Blogs, and Feministing in particular, with its everywoman authors and active comments section, engage in both news production and consumption, often at the same time. When a Feministing contributor posts on a certain subject, readers in the comments section will often give their own critiques (thus producing news) or post related links and articles (re-producing their own consumption). Instead of the static relationship a reader might have with nbcnews.com, for instance, wherein they simply read articles, on Feministing readers can actively engage with news items by joining a community of commenters adding their own two cents. In this way, blogs like Feministing

contribute to creating an entirely new media dynamic, subverting the conventional provider/consumer paradigm.

Whether through framing issues for republication in mainstream news sources, informing journalists of popular or important news stories, or allowing readers to engage with their news, blogs have ultimately presented a challenge to mainstream media modes of discourse and are beginning to fundamentally shift former media standards. Even erstwhile blogger Graham vows to continue his blogging efforts because it presents "an opportunity to learn, a license to explore, and a sense of community" (1999, p. 38). In spite of this potential for creating a long-term, fundamental shift in political discourse, creating stronger links to more direct forms of real-life activism remains a challenge for bloggers. Feministing writer Martin comments that "I don't believe that protesting (a la 1960s) is particularly effective in this day and age, so I think we all need to get off our asses and figure out a way to create social change after we've put in our couple hours dialoguing and reflecting online" (personal interview, November 15, 2007). Summing up the arguments captured here, Kahn and Kaplan (2003) conclude that "The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past struggle, but politics is already mediated by broadcast, computer, and information technologies and will increasingly be so in the future" (p. 14).

8 Conclusion

Through the course of this paper, I have addressed the blog Feministing in context of its origins, strategies, and outcomes as they relate to third-wave ideology and debates about the effectiveness of online activism. Through exploring the ways Feministing's origins correlate to those of the larger blogosphere, I have demonstrated how political disillusionment and alienation from the mainstream functioned centrally to push bloggers to begin electronically publishing their own takes on news and current events. In this vein, I also discussed the recent burgeoning of feminist bloggers, and some of the gendered stereotypes which persist in largely keeping women out of some political spheres online.

In a section on the blog's strategies, I examined aspects of Feministing including its use of slang and informal language and its attention to pop culture analysis and broader gender dynamics. With its stated goals of stimulating inclusive political discourse and activism, I explained how these strategies incorporated third-wave ideology and worked to accomplish these aims. In analyzing the of the outcomes of Feministing and other similar blogs, I utilized both academic and popular literature to explore arguments that blogs – and related internet technologies – comprise nothing more than "quiet", watered-down activism, or if they were actually the origins of an echo chamber, through which

their content and opinions reverberated through mainstream media, ultimately reshaping our conventional political discourse through their interactive nature.

Finally, I conclude here that Feministing has not contributed to direct political change or action, largely due to the nature of its third-wave strategies, which emphasize individual thought and action while not comprising a structured movement. As recounted in the brief literature review of third-wave themes in my introduction, third-wave feminism is understood as an ideology, not a movement, and as such, becomes manifested in diverse and diffused ways.

Even as the complex, ideological nature of third-wave feminism limits Feministing's ability to make unified, direct political impacts, I argue that the blogging movement – especially activist sites – has in fact begun to fundamentally change the conventional media paradigm of provider (usually corporate and mainstream) and consumer (us, reading the newspaper). In contrast, interactive sites like Feministing contribute to a broader shift in the way we view media and our role in its production and consumption. It seems Feministing will not elect a candidate or push specific legislation, but will instead result in longer-term fundamental changes in how political discourse and activism is carried out and communicated. And that, it seems, is an accomplishment of which third-wavers can be proud.

9 Acknowledgements

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Civil Society, New Media and Participation in Germany

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Abstract. This paper discusses the relation between eParticipation and civil society in Germany using a theoretical framework based on three arenas of political communication: the traditional political system, the mass-media system, and the civil society public space. Currently in Germany the traditional political system prevails and funds research about representative oriented eParticipation activities. Informal and direct democracy oriented eParticipation research and development activities are left to foundations or civil society organizations and activists.

1 Civil Society and eParticipation – perspectives on the concepts

There are many definitions of civil society due to the political perspectives of those who write/decide what it is (from the analytical point of view) or what it should be (from the normative point of view). Wikipedia states, that "there are myriad definitions of civil society" (Wikipedia civil society, 2008). They present the definition of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). From the political science point of view the LSE sees civil society as a "concept located strategically at the cross-section of important strands of intellectual developments of the social sciences" (LSE: What is civil society, 2008). There are lots of definitions describing this concept from various perspectives depending on the normative political background. A widely used definition of this concept is

illustrative: "Civil society refers to the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group" (LSE: What is civil society, 2008)

This rich picture presents the different concepts which underlie the term of civil society in general. In Germany an assumption is that the primary characteristics of current democratic societies are fragmentation, diversity, identity and individualism. This leads to the question what keeps the society together. One prominent answer is that "democratic societies must rely on people with community-oriented skills, who trust one another and who take an interest both in one another and in the welfare of the community" (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2003, p. 9). A common background of motives and attitudes of the citizen oriented to the common good is necessary: civic-mindedness which encourages civic actions. These civic actions open up the social space of a civil society. "Mutual interest and trust, together with shared goals and a variety of resources, result in commitment and involvement. People must have a sense that they have something at stake; they must become involved in social life in order to be integrated into society and help society cohere. The key to integration is participation" (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2003, p. 9). This understanding of civil society with participation as the key action – using new or old media – is based on shared values, communication and actions. Following this understanding (e)participation equals (e)communication.

The concept of civil society is related to the vision of the social sphere. The social sphere consists of communication and communicative actions between actors (humans and groups) beyond the family and the state. It is a communication space where different kinds of media play the role as intermediate between different actors. In former times it was dominated by the direct face-to-face communication on a market (market metaphor) now new media come into play and augment the former communication formats by new formats enabled through the Internet or mass media. Different new names exist like Network Society (Schuler & Day, 2004) which has to be shaped according to the visions of a civil society: "By working together in a collaborative and cooperative manner, by sharing experiences and knowledge through discussions that legitimize actions, and through communicative action that enables citizens to engage in shaping local community initiatives and enterprises, great strides can be made ..... social

advances can be made locally that impact at the global level" (Schuler & Day, 2004 p. viii). This idea of a civil sphere follows the model of discourse-oriented civil democracy of Habermas. Different other visions correlate with the vision mentioned above: eDemocracy, eGovernment, eVoting etc. They describe concepts and initiatives to use ICT to foster effectiveness and efficiency of administration and government as well as the empowerment of citizens actively taking part in political affairs. One view of these concepts and initiatives present Ann Macintosh and Angus Whyte in presenting a working definition of "eParticipation as the use of ICTs to support information provision and 'top down' engagement, i.e. government-led initiatives, or 'ground up' efforts to empower citizens, civil society organizations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives. Effective information provision is often seen as a corollary of effective engagement and empowerment." (Macintosh & Whyte, 2006, p. 2). In this working definition the addressees of the eParticipation activities of the citizen are their elected representatives.

The direct democratic view is an additional perspective than addressing the representatives and taking part indirectly via the representatives in political decisions (pars capere). Here ICT's are used as means to mobilize protest and publish different alternative opinions, aims and solutions than the existing political and mass media systems provide. This can be done by established civil society groups like Oxfam, Green Peace or Attac or by initiating political protest (organizing individuals into groups, publication of activities and positions) by singles or groups (Metzges, 2007). These two concepts of participation, the representative democracy concept and the direct democracy concept, have been discussed since the seventies when participation in decision making in Germany was introduced and organized by the government as the driving force (v. Alemann, 1975). Participation was codified (city planning, urban development, traffic planning etc.) and since then called "formal participation" because the means, procedures, actors and roles were prescribed by formal code. Besides this formal participation codified by the political system, informal participation existed in the political practice. Well known were the campaigning and protest against the university education system and the construction of nuclear power plants in Germany in the seventies of last century. These protest actions were directed on one side towards the representative political system and the mass media system and on the other side as well towards interested citizens and organizations. At this time first thoughts were published to use computers and networks as means to publish the opinion of the citizen in contrast to the dominant voices of the established political system and established mass media system to establish a counter-public beyond the traditional mass-media. For instance, Krauch (1972) wrote a path-breaking book about how to implement a computer democracy in 1972.

The formal and informal participation activities in the 1970s and 1980s produced several new formats of participation like future workshops, mediation, citizen forum, public hearings, round-table etc. These face-to-face formats required the local presence of the active citizen. The event of ITC's changed this dramatically. The role of time and space changed and these formats were adjusted to the new possibilities the ICT's opened up. Additionally new formats of eParticipation were invented and currently experienced practically like online-petition, online-dialogue, citizen wikis and blogs, social bookmarking, web campaigning etc. But the gap between formal and informal participation and representative oriented versus direct democracy oriented participation is still valid. In Germany the political system prevails and funds research about representative oriented eParticipation activities. Informal and direct democracy oriented eParticipation research and development activities are left to foundations or civil society organizations and activists.

Three positions of the analysis of eParticipation co-exist in Germany:

1.   For the political practice political practitioners and empirical researchers do not divide any more between participative and e-participative formats of participation. They are interested in the mobilization effects of the different formats which evolved into a multichannel participation: face-to-face, mass-media and digitally assisted formats co-exist (Kubicek et al., 2007). In these empirical analyses a reconstruction which format shows better results in giving citizen a voice is an open research question.

2.   Political scientists look at effects or potentials of participation in general and not at the effects or potentials of special participation formats like eParticipation (Leggewie & Bieber, 2003). They are interested in the media use in the civil society or the political system and thus do not distinguish between communicative actions and eParticipation. A conservative stream questions eParticipation in general: is it eroding the representative system, how much participation needs a democracy, which new risks emerge etc.

3.   The third group is more or less technology driven. It consists of consultants or computer scientists more interested in practical real-life experiments than in hermeneutic analysis. They often try a technology push approach to experience the tools and effects of eParticipation in real cases. Famous projects practice eParticipation e.g. to provide proposals from citizens to the municipal government how to spend the budget of a city. But in the cyber budget projects again you find the hybrid formats of authentic face-to-face participation and mediated eParticipation: face-to-face, mass-media and eParticipation are entwined and not separated (Stiftung Mitarbeit, 2007).

2 Civil society (Bürgerschaftliches Engagement) in Germany – the state of the art

The best overview over civil society (in German = Bürgerschaftliches Engagement) in Germany gives a survey from 1999 published 2000 (Rosenbladt, 2000). This study was sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Family, Seniors, Women and Youth. It shows that 34% of the citizens are active in at least one domain of civil society. The majority of these activities are related to the individual life style: sports, leisure and social contacts. The domains are shown in figure 1:

Figure 1: Political social engagement

There are several organization formats used by the different communities. The most preferred format is the club. In 2001 over 544.000 clubs were registered in Germany (Vereinstatistik, 2001) and an estimated number of 500.000 clubs existed additionally to this number (without legal obligations). This shows that the dominant organization format is the club and the dominant sector is sport. A survey on behalf of the German Bundestag on Civil Society shows the different sectors of the existing clubs in figure 2:

Different sectors of clubs

Figure 2: Different sectors of clubs

It is surprising that only one percent of the clubs are active in the environment protection. An explanation for this can be that mo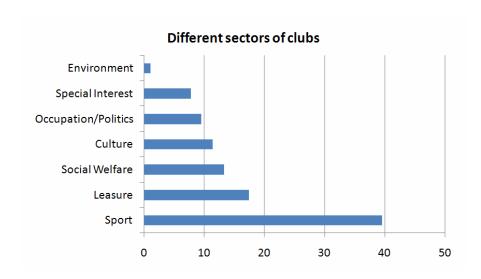st of the environmental activities have short term goals and are single point activities like protecting a certain habitat against road construction or reducing the amount of traffic noise. After reaching this goal the activity stops. Other sectors have longer lifecycles like the engagement in sports or religious groups. This draws the attention to another important factor of civil engagement: their lifecycle and sustainability. A survey done in the field of non-profit organizations from 2001 shows that one quarter of the existing organizations was founded just 2 years ago between 1998 and 1999. This shows that civic engagement in a civil society needs sustainable organization format with legal rules and financial support to guarantee a certain degree of sustainability. Two groups are underrepresented: women and youth. Besides the religious and social sectors only one third of the engaged citizens are women. An explanation could be that many women still follow the classical guiding vision of the engagement in "Church, Children, Kitchen" and often because of the existing division of labor between man and women do not have sufficient time for civic engagement. Younger people are engaged in the sports sector but lack motivation to engage in the other ones. New concepts are necessary to cope with these problems. To empower civic engagement the German parliament founded a Study Commission which reported to the German Parliament and the public in a Study Commission's Report in June 2002. A subcommittee was founded to foster civic engagement. This became a permanent governmental activity for fostering civil society activities.

3 Analytical framework: Arenas of political communication

In European countries we live in media societies: political and societal systems are intertwined and observe themselves and the other system by public opinion which is the publicized opinion. Using the metaphor of the mirror public opinion presents current information about the self and the other for reflection and adaption (Luhmann, 2000). Public opinion is dominated by mass media like TV, radio, print press which broadcast opinions to the public with the help of journalists. Mass media had a monopoly in defining the different contents of public opinion. Because of the sad experiences with the radio during the Nazi regime used as propaganda instrument several approaches were undertaken in Germany to weaken this de facto information monopoly by adding additional information formats (like citizen radio; campus radio etc.). Laws exist to control the content of the concurrent private and public German radio and TV systems. Private TV and radio in Germany is to be seen as a public task and have to fulfill prescribed information requirements which are controlled by non-governmental and non-profit institutions (e.g. Landesanstalt für Medien Nordrhein-Westfalen LFM). The mass-media system prevails and is the dominant factor: it holds and defines the mirror for government, administration and citizen.

Since 1930 the wish from Berthold Brecht exists that everybody should be at the same time sender (producer) and listener (user) of radio programs. The Internet and the use of computers as digital media opened up new chances the monopolistic mass-media could not provide: the poly-directional interaction over networks from person to person or person to public. Netcasting was the addition to broadcasting (Bonchek, 1996). Several social and political potentials for the empowerment of the individual or groups of citizen were seen: better information, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, opinion building, coalition building and collective actions. Computers as media networked over the Internet created a technology which is recombinant, interactive and underspecified so that it can be further developed, implemented and changed according to the social learning process of the users.

To better understand the role of empowerment of the citizen through communication means we apply ideas and concepts of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas' normative goals are rationalization, democratization and humanization of societies based on communicative competence and un-coerced rational discourse (Habermas, 1981). This concept of a political system requires an activist public sphere, where matters of common interest and political issues can be discussed, and the force of public opinion can influence the decision-making process (Wikipedia Habermas, 2008). It focuses on the communication and communicative actions. Habermas sees three arenas of political communication:

1. In the center of the political system are the institutionalized discourses and negotiations (modes and formats of communication) between government, administration, parliaments and courts. These "old" formats are well-known to all actors. The discourses are regulated by law, norms and regulations and well established and build a stable fundament for a society.

2. In the periphery of the political system the media system publishes opinions, disseminates to audiences, polls opinions, thus create public opinions. Actors are politicians, lobbyists and civil society actors. They mediate the political communication in weak publics and partial publics built around special purposes and values.

3. In the civil society every-day talks in episodic publics take place. Actors are individuals, groups, associations, associational networks and social movements which are part of the civil society. They construct the public sphere. The communication within these publics is not political but social communication like in many blogs today. This communication becomes political when it enters the periphery of the political system and the mass media gives it a voice. It becomes political as well if it enters the institutionalized discourses of the centre of the political system as well e.g. in public planning processes or environmental hearings.
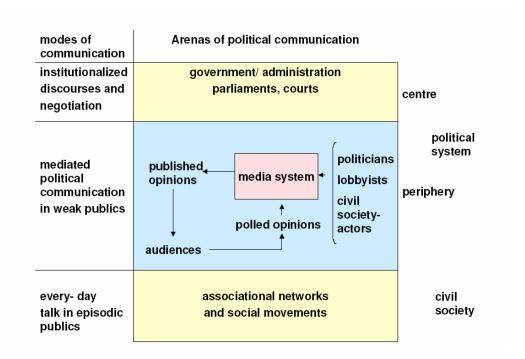

Figure 3: Modes and arenas of political communication according to Habermas

The three arenas of political communication are intertwined (see figure 3). The civil society communicative actions become public and political when they are

observed and adopted into the modes of communication of the political system. For example, the content of a blog about wearing a veil can be seen as a personal diary and reactions on this as aesthetical discourse. If it is published in a newspaper and discussed under the topic of political correctness it becomes part of a political pragmatic discourse. We are interested to look at the civil society arena with its abundance of trials and practical experiences to establish and use new formats of communication and participation.

3.1 Action and research fields

Reinermann und v. Lucke (2002) show (see figure 4) the different actors which do have the option of networked interactions based on new digital media. This figure can be used to initiate research and development of communicative effects for a civil society. The blue triangle is the current Bermuda-triangle of research and funding by public or private authorities as well as national and international organizations. It shows were the money goes in: mostly in government to government implementation and research especially under the goal of internal efficiency and efficacy (IEE). A more balanced funding is critically claimed in Germany under the metaphor "balanced eGovernment" which should include the participation of citizen as well.

Interactive Groups define Subdomains of eGovernment and eDemocracy				
	Citizens	Government & Administration	Second Sector Businesses	Third Sector NPO / NGO
Citizens	C 2 C	C 2 G	C 2 B	C 2 N
Government & Administration	G 2 C	G 2 G I E E	G 2 B	G 2 N
Second Sector Businesses	B 2 C	B 2 G	B 2 B	B 2 N
Third Sector NPO / NGO	N 2 C	N 2 G	N 2 B	N 2 N

Figure 4: Actors and domains of eGovernment and eDemocracy

For civil society research the blue arrows show the relation between the actors. The most important research field is in the relation of C2C and in the intertwinement / connectivity to other actors seen from the perspective of the citizen (first) and from the Non-Governmental Organizations or Non-Profit-Organization (second).

4 Overview about eParticipation activities

In Germany several overviews exist about e-Participation and participation activities on different levels. The most recent study about e-Participation is from January 2008: "e-Participation – Electronic participation of citizen and economy at the eGovernment" from Albrecht et al. (2008) funded by the German Federal Ministry of the Interior. Another study which discusses the current status is: E-Participation: Participation Projects in the Internet by Stiftung Mitarbeit (2007). The current legal and political status on local and regional level presents Kost (2005): Direct Democracy in German Bundesländer. Besides this several other research papers exist like MA-theses or conference contributions which explore the current participation activities (e.g. Alexandridis, 2005; Mambrey, 2006). We use this information to identify the current trends and activities in referring to the Habermas' framework of the three political communication arenas of the political system, mass media and civil society.

4.1 Arena 1: Institutionalized discourses in the center of the political system

At federal and state level there are several initiatives by the German Bundestag (and its' Study Commission's reports) towards promoting civic activities and to further develop a civil society overall. In the beginning of this century the former German Chancellor Schröder created the guiding vision "empowering state" as focus of these activities. Since then different advisor groups and a subcommittee on civil society of the German Bundestag discuss related questions and induce changes to support the civil society activities of the citizen e.g. through tax reduction, insurances, volunteering initiatives for younger citizen and the like. This is due to the fact that civic activists are more engaged in elections and political affairs than non-activists and are content with the representative democracy today (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2004, p. 107). Although civil society plays an important role for this arena (center of the political system) new formats of citizen participation are not considered yet. The political system relies on the existing representative formats. It reluctantly experiments with few digital formats of eParticipation like ePetitioning or weekly video podcasts of Chancellor Merkel. Federal government is not a driving force in modernizing the political system and more or less informs about the legal and political possibilities to practice direct forms of participation like initiatives of the citizen (Volksinitiativen Verfassung NRW Art. 67 a), petitions and referenda.

   E-Government is first of all seen as a guiding vision to raise the level of efficiency and efficacy of the administrative institutions, secondly to change the relation between government, administration and the economic sector (new integrated processes) but less than a vision to politically empower the citizen.

This unbalanced way of fostering eGovernment by the political system provoked the critique of an important foundation which claimed to strengthen e-Participation as well. In written contributions of politicians and administration to support the vision of a citizen-oriented community as a means to strengthen democracy usually well-known formats and channels of participation are mentioned but eParticipation is often excluded. There are hints (funding of research studies on eInclusion and eParticipation by the Federal Minister of the Interior) that eParticipation will play at least a minor role in the future but the current activity plans of the German government (Umsetzungsplan, 2007) speak a different language: they aim at new E-Identity-concepts, at a safe communications infrastructure and at citizen portals. E-Participation is currently not within the focus of the political system. It is not a driving force promoting eParticipation and by this fosters political reforms.

4.2 Arena 2: The mediated political communication by the mass media system

The position and reactions of the mass media system to the eParticipation aims and concepts and the experiments are ambiguous. Mass media fears the competition of the Internet and at the same time uses the Internet as a selling point. Reporting about the options, experiments and experiences made in the Internet is an interesting topic especially for the younger generation of customers of mass media: these reports construct and shape the views about hype and lifestyle of many e.g. "We are the Net: how the new Internet will change the society" (Spiegel Spezial, 2007). The different domains are advertisement, music and videos, gaming, dating, virtual worlds and currently the changing role of the user who became a "produser"= the user and producer at the same time. The political content is weak except privacy issues. Most of the mass media report critically about the current shift from private to public caused through new communication habits and communication formats of Web 2.0 applications.

Reporting about eParticipation experiments is usually done locally in context with local actions where people are directly affected. Mass media on local level in urban areas compete with other media. Mass media is afraid to share the awareness of the users with other media and by that risk to lose the functions of goal-keeping (funneling interests) and opinion leadership (interpretation dominance). But eParticipation experiments on local level made clear: the support of mass media is a necessity to mobilize citizen to use eParticipation formats. In their final report about experiments with eParticipation on local level Kubicek et al. (2007) show the importance of a media mix to mobilize and engage citizens in local affairs. Without this support eParticipation stays weak. This insight coincides with other experimental findings of citizen eParticipation, e.g. the experiments to produce a municipal cyber budget from a citizens' point of view (Bürgerhaushalt Berlin Lichtenberg, 2008). E-Participation usually exists as one

format connected to other formats of citizen participation like face-to-face meetings, hearings, discussion fora in news papers accompanied by mass media informing the citizen. E-Participation experiments need this hybrid structure of multi-channel participation and awareness rising by mass media to be successful. Thus there is a tremendous effect of mass media on e-Participation as enabler mobilizing citizen.

Mass media has the obligation to inform but it is at the same time an economic business. Several media moguls try to implement and run hybrid social platforms on local or regional levels which include city wikis, blogs, videos, chat, communities and other information, communication and transaction features supported by the Internet or other digital devices. Such hybrid social platform is called "Stadtmenschen" ("cityzen") (e.g. www.ksta.de/stadtmenschen). They do not have a specific interest in eParticipation or foster eParticipation as a means in planning and decision-making. They are interested in interesting news to please (win and keep) customers. That is why entertainment and advertisement for lifestyle products usually dominates. On the other hand such hybrid social platform can offer a strategic possibility to use it for eParticipation activities on local level.

4.3 Arena 3: Every-day talks in episodic publics: the civil society

Currently in Germany we can distinct between three groups dealing with eParticipation:

1. One group refers explicitly on political eParticipation and acts as political missionaries pro eParticipation. These are the foundations of the political parties, trade unions and other foundations of civil society associations: Hans-Böckler-Foundation; Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation etc. and non-governmental or non-profit organizations like the Bertelsmann-Foundation or Stiftung Mitarbeit. They publish their views on eParticipation and try to influence the political debate. They are busy in the field of political education.

2. The other group consists of individual scientists and activists interested in experimenting and testing and thus empirical findings about certain tools and devices, organization formats, mobilization strategies, requirements and other contextual and situational factors for successful eParticipation. Their platforms are scientific workshops, conferences and proceedings or books.

3. The third group consists of citizens using digital devices and platforms (blogs, chat, fora, news groups, community networks, etc.) for their social every-day talk about a wide range of topics in their life. These social talks become political when the political system or mass media system become aware of the content, adopts the content and publishes and discuss it within their systems. If the connectivity of a single point between the civil society

sphere and the mass media and political system is achieved a social chat turns to a political discussion. This is stated for the US by Drezner and Farell (2004). Social blogs can gain political power by attracting journalists to transport focal points to awareness producing mass media systems with wider reach. In Germany researchers did not find empirical evidence which favors this hypothesis (Holler et al., 2008). Can the episodic talks in civil society be a driving force to foster eParticipation? The current problems in Germany are the small amount of downloads compared to the outreach of the mass media, the rude style of discussions in blogs and fora, legal prosecutions of writers and the insecurity if a message is true or false. At the moment the effects of this new media formats on the political system and mass media are due to research.

5 Conclusions

From the political science's point of view it is too early to conclude about the relationship between civil society and eParticipation. Currently we face a rapid speed of innovation of devices, communication formats and services and the much slower adoption and use by customer groups which again causes new requirements and the reshaping of devices and services. It is unclear which of the often technically pushed applications will be adopted and embedded in the political culture of a country. It is unclear which social and political conventions, norms and rules will be developed during the long term practical use and thus will offer a sustainable new format of political action. In Germany often constitutional law hinders the adoption of new technologies and the emergence of new practices (e.g. eVoting). Moreover, because of past political experiences in Germany politicians and political scientists especially are reluctant to experiment with direct approaches of democracy and prefer representative procedures based on "old" institutions. In academia, sociologists and media scientists are interested in experiencing new ways of communication and action. Political scientists often are institution oriented and do not empirically experiment new formats in practice but ask about the risks for democracy and effects on the stability of the political system. At the moment in mainstream research, eParticipation usually is seen positively as a means for empowering the citizen and negatively as a risk for the representative system. The belief exists that more eParticipation causes more democracy which is far too simple: we have to understand and monitor the ongoing changes and by publishing or experimenting trying to shape tools, techniques, applications and conventions. There are critical considerations as well which see a new event of fraud, control, identity theft, fragmentation, segmentation and new hegemonic discourses due to new elites or pressure groups in our political system (Offe, 2003). A critical non-biased discussion of eParticipation has to be on the agenda of workshops and conferences. At the

moment the promotion of eParticipation and discussion of practical experiences and requirements prevail.

Coming back to Habermas' framework of the three arenas of political communication: which actor will be the driving force for eParticipation in Germany? In my opinion, the institutional discourses in the center of the political system will be augmented by new citizen-oriented eParticipation applications on local (municipal level) like citizen budgets or referenda for or against a single event. The mass media system will publish focal points identified in social or political blogs, podcasts and other social platforms and thus give these voices a wider reach, an indirect form of eParticipation. The most interesting changes are expected in the civil society arena of communication and action. Following the thesis that the Internet empowers those groups already politically active and being aware of the limited resources of individuals to act politically, associational forces will become more active players in the communication arena and thus will impact political decision making and its outcome. In my opinion, the (socio-technical) empowerment of the single user on macro-political level or even EC-level probably is a myth. This empowerment may work on the micro-political level of local politics but on macro-political level associations are much better equipped to monitor, campaign or act in favor of their purposes and values (Leggewie & Bieber, 2003).

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What kind of grassroots e-participation? The uneasy demand of new politics in Italy: between continuity and innovation

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Abstract. The first part of the article provides a review of the empirical research about the usages of Internet and ICTs by civil society in Italy in the last decade. Three periods are identified, related to the spreading to the Internet access and the political evolving context: the pioneering phase along the '90s, characterized by the activism of one-issues movements and a great component of techies among the online activists; the new global movements and the anti-Berlusconi mobilizations at the beginning of the new decade; the more recent phase characterized by the emersion of the blogosphere, and the extension of the citizens mobilizations. The expectations towards the enabling virtue of Internet and ICTs are discussed, giving evidence to the persisting problems in innovating both the communication and organizational practices of the collective action and the relationship with the mass media system in the public sphere. In the last section of the paper, the analysis focuses on one of the most relevant non-institutional experience of e-participation within the national context: OpenPolis/Voisietequi. This initiative provides tools for horizontal information and control over politicians, in the attempt to 'reverse' the prevailing logic of 'techno-politics'.

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1 Introduction

The relevance of grassroots forms of online participation as a source of social change and democratization within the network society has been pointed out by the classical literature on the social and political implications of the new digital media (Castells, 1996). The potential of widening and deepening the citizens' participation by means of the Internet has been increasingly located more in the initiatives of civil society and individual citizens than in the domain of e-democracy institutional projects (Bennet, 2003). Ideally, the new media may improve the deliberative quality of participation at the grassroots level, favouring more inclusive and discursive forms. New technologies are expected also to broaden the participation to a wider number and variety of citizens. Furthermore, new media should favour new flows of information directly by social actors, without the intermediation of mainstream mass media.

In Italy in the last decade there has been a growing and variegated diffusion of the political usages of Internet and other new media by different social actors. Three phases of citizens' political usages of the ICTs in Italy and related studies can be distinguished. A first pioneering period leads from BBS to the advent of the Web and it is characterized by the activism of small groups, mobilized on single issues, often related to the social and political features of information society development (cyber-rights), as well as to civil rights issues. The second period, at the turning point of the new decade, is featured by the public emersion of the new media activism in conjunction with the wave of mobilizations of new global social and pacifist movements and, in the Italian national context, of the movements of protest against Berlusconi's government. Finally, the current phase shows a densification of the Internet by the mainstream media and a parallel process of pluralisation through the Web 2.0 applications, related to a wider access to the Internet, in a context shaped by the extension of a feeling of strong criticism and disaffection towards all political parties (Mastropaolo, 2006; Mete, 2008) and the mass media system. The most relevant experience in this field is the online-offline network promoted by the Blog of Beppe Grillo. The changing profiles of the citizens-activists involved in these phases, as well as the crucial relation between the online opportunities and the Italian offline political and communicational context, are underlined.

In the last section, we focus on the analysis of an example of e-participation tools (*OpenPolis* and *VoiSieteQui*) implemented by a small association within the context of this third wave of the citizens e-participation development, featured by the diffusion of Web 2.0. The core idea of this project is to provide digital tools enabling 'reverse' in favour to the citizens the vertical logic of techno-politics (Rodotà, 1997), which is based on polls and citizens profiling, managed by political actors (parties, professional politicians and political consultants). According to the 'reversed engineering' approach to techno-politics, the citizens

would play, by means of the Openpolis platform, an active and cooperative role in monitoring, analysing and updating a data storage on the political leaders' behaviours (tracked out through speeches, votes, electoral programs, appointments in public and private companies, etc.). In parallel, during the last two campaigns for the general election, a peculiar service was launched to intercept the citizens' interests towards the project: *Voisietequi* is an online game/poll designed cooperatively in the form of a test and aiming to activate a flow of interactive dialogic relationships among respondents. It is a way to disclose 'in practice' one of the central techno-political 'dispositives', which allows to the politicians to channel and shape the demands of the their voters avoiding any dialogical relationship.

Although some limits of the current practices of participation through the ICTs seem inherent to the nature of the social relationships and of the collective action, online as well as offline, the main constrain to a wider empowerment of the citizen participation emerged on the ground of the relationships between virtual sphere and general public sphere, non commercial information spaces and market-oriented ones.

2 From the pioneering activism to the civic telematics: cyberspace between citizenship and market in the '90s

In Italy the development of the political usage of digital networks by civil society begins at the end of the '80s, after a former season of quite widespread experimentations of local media, both radios ('70s) and televisions ('80s). At this stage, digital networks were mainly BBS, basically means of alternative information for activists in the fields of internationalism, environmentalism, pacifism, gender issues and feminism, civil and human rights, techno-artistic vanguards emerging in cyberpunk, digital art and hackers communities. Therefore, the Italian virtual communities were well connected to their related international networks in a growing 'web' of local to local, or local to global relationships. These experiences involved specialized, often marginalized, groups of critical techies, who conceived the new media as crucial tools for a societal transformation in a direction of pluralisation and democratization of the information flows and of the organizational forms of the collective action. Thus, most of the available contributions about these experiences are narrations, where the protagonists offer their outlook on the potentials of new media; they often have emancipative and optimistic expectations (Gubitosa *et al.*, 1996; Picci, 1999). There are also critical analysis that stress both the persistence of usual power functionings and the new risks of social exclusion, authoritarian political control and privatization of knowledge. These new risks appeared connected to

the lack of updating of the citizenship rights adequate to the digital age and knowledge-based capitalism (Rodotà 1997; Freschi & Leonardi, 1998; Stranonetwork, 2000; Pasquinelli, 2002; Tozzi & Di Corinto, 2002).

The central question was whether computer mediated communication was a more egalitarian and democratic model, thus empirical research was concentrated on the analysis of virtual communication and cyberspace. Empirical findings emerged in contrast with the rhetoric of horizontality developed in the first virtual online community, even in the case of the electronic conference experimented by cyberpunk activists communities (Paccagnella, 1997): social relationships are shaped in continuity with offline social dynamics, showing an online reproduction of the gender issues (Capussotti, 1997). Other studies (Freschi 2000, 2002), still focusing on these minorities and other stigmatized communities (like the hackers), which have a peculiar place in the academic literature on cyberspace as vanguards and pioneers, shed light on the interchanges between online and offline relationships, extending the research tools beyond the online sphere, by means of interviews, ethnographic observation and focus groups. Thanks to the online-offline interlink, virtual communities can feed social capital. When horizontal structures of power relations emerge inside the groups, it depends more on the offline social roles and the common background culture, than on the communication instruments adopted. A further emerging finding is the evident trend, along time, toward a re-territorialization of the online groups, reflecting their social relations maps.

The debate on the participative potentials of the web knows a new élan with the birth of the first 'municipality digital networks' in the mid '90s and an expansion of Internet usage due to the new World Wide Web services. The pre-existing grassroots online groups proposed to the municipalities to adopt an approach opened to the civil society contributions: free access to the Internet, autonomous spaces on the websites, educational and training programs addressed to all the citizens: a kind of new online local public sphere, which at that time appeared easier to attain than in previous technological phase because of the new tools provided by the World Wide Web. In most of the cases these proposals remained unheard by the local political institutions, which saw the new digital networks as an instrument for the provision of e-services by the administrations for the citizens. The underlying problem of the debate is the tension between the demand for access to a new free communicational sphere and the emerging new market of digital services (Berra, 1997; Freschi, 1998). The outcome of this confrontation depended largely on the local political context and the relative policy innovation models (Baglioni & Berra, 1999; Freschi, 2000). At the end of '90s the civic network model based on the provision of administrative services largely prevailed, while the institutional channels opened to citizens' participation seemed to provide very rare occasions of a true debate with the politicians: the

supposed interactive spaces often reflected a mere symbolic function (Freschi, 2003).

With reference to the political impact of citizen participation fostered by the new media, the problem of the access to the general public sphere was already visible. In the case of the mobilizations promoted by women associations, for instance, the gap between the degree of development of online mobilizations and the ability to penetrate the mainstream media agenda seems to be very large (Leonardi, 2001). The issues related to digital rights, privacy, free licensing, raised by hackers communities and later continued by growing new professional groups, will not achieve public relevance in the Italian media until the second half of the following decade, when, in practice, these issues will be imposed by the international agenda.

3 Internet, new global movements and the protests against Berlusconi's Government

At the beginning of the new decade, the Italian political landscape was strongly characterized by the shock of the days of the G8 meeting held in Genova in July 2001, culminated in the murder of Carlo Giuliani, a 22 years old participant to the demonstration contesting the governmental meeting. In this international occasion the digital media activism played an important role, revealing the incredible violence exerted by the police on the participants to the protest events, and providing information about the workshops and events promoted by the organizations of the counter-meeting. News collected by non-mainstream media received a lot of attention by online and offline national and international media. The Italian node of the world network Indymedia - one of the targets of the bloody police repression in the Diaz's school[1] - had an important role of alternative source of information also for the mass media channels (Freschi, 2003). The participative web radio, Radio Gap, based at the Genoa Media Center, that started to broadcast on the 16th of July 2001, also played a key function, due to the privileged and lively accessibility of the radio-channel.

The new digital networks became also spaces of social and political elaboration, interconnection of different political identities and demands which characterized Italian altermondialist movement since its beginning. In Italy the movement is particularly different, made up by social groups with distant cultural backgrounds: pacifists, 'disobedients', environmental groups, feminists, grassroots and consolidated trade unions, networks promoting international cooperation and development, catholic groups and anarchists. Along the preparing

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[1] Diaz's school had hosted a dormitory for activists and the media center of the counter-meeting during the G8. Here, the night after Giuliani's murder, police broke with extreme violence, while people were sleeping

phase of the counter-meeting, movements and associations' mailing-lists were very active, and the movements' media got consolidated (Calderaro, 2007). Some studies put in evidence that movement's mailing lists are "permanent meetings", which favours a constant deliberation among members (Della Porta & Mosca; 2006, p.538; Calderaro 2007). However, according to a diachronic research that takes into account a longer period and other movement's experiences, mailing lists tend to be organized in smaller groups, with different amplitude of the circles of dissemination of the information, according to its strategic value, and a decreasing deliberative attitude, so that groups would always prefer to organize the relevant deliberative processes in offline meetings (Freschi, 2008). A number of empirical studies (Freschi, 2003; Della Porta & Mosca, 2004, 2006; Mascio 2008) have underlined the relevance of the cognitive functions of online communication: news, articles, special 'dossier' but also conference, seminars' materials and bibliographies. The discursive flows on the mailing lists are important resources of 'in progress' knowledge and collective memory, for both the members of the movement networks and the external general public.

Among the participants to the new global mobilizations the diffusion of Internet is significantly higher than in the general population (Andretta *et al.*, 2002). Notwithstanding, the Internet seems to be more an instrument for offline mobilization, than a space for online communication and mobilization (Freschi 2000; Della Porta & Mosca, 2006; Mascio 2008). The pioneering phase seems to be partly overcome. In the new context of diffused social mobilization, therefore, the availability of technical resources, intercepting the motivations of a bottom-up participation, has been translated in the opportunity for forming new identities, and for transforming the forms of civic and political participation, thanks to the spread of alternative practices of technology, communication, information, put in practice by social actors coming from specific experiences and critical readings of the dominant models (Freschi, 2003, p.70). Grassroots new media, or *new media-activism*, so defined for its characterization as channel for contents produced directly by the participants to the mobilizations, tried to overcome the constrains of the so called 'movement's media', perceived as structurally similar to mainstream media for their market dependence and organization in the production of information. It emerges the effort to develop forms of relations among the social actors who directly take part to the collective action, in order to intervene in the production of the public sphere (Freschi, 2003, p. 52, p.58). The concept of *right of information* is replaced by new media activism with the right of *self-production of communication,* at the base of a "new idea of democracy and citizenship". In this way, media activism has become directly a "model and metaphor of producing the society", that is to say an instrument for creating new political subjectivities, according to the principle that "it is information that shapes users" (Pasquinelli, 2002, p.17). Nevertheless, experiences like Indymedia wave between a plan of reform of the media system and a plan of emancipation

from the system itself (Milan, 2006, p.558). Although the later crisis of the ItalyIndymedia project[1] shows these unresolved problems of a such ambitious experimentation, in terms of objectives of openness and horizontality, it could be also interpreted as the result of the successful spreading of the un-intermediate communicative practices within the following mobilizations.

The growing interconnection between digital activism and offline based activism seemed able to challenge the mainstream mass media model. Nevertheless, this seems realistic as there was a favourable social and political context, characterized by a high level of social mobilization, marked by the development of social movements since Seattle and, in Italy, by the wide protest movements against the tycoon Prime Minister. The fact that Berlusconi controlled the largest part of the national mass media system, was an element that favoured the interest of the opposition groups towards the utilization of communication in the Internet. After the boost in using the Internet as an instrument of participation by the altermondialist movement at the beginning of the new decade, two mobilizations took place during the Berlusconi's government and increased the presence of the civil society on the Internet: the very relevant pacifist national mobilization – synchronized at global level and spread thanks to the web – and a growing number of mobilizations aiming for democratic rules since 2002, named *Girotondi* (ring-a-ring-o' roses) because of the use of this classic children game during the protest events. These mobilizations found a further channel in the new development of the tele-street movement (Andreucci, 2006), that set up independent TV stations in several metropolitan areas at sub-municipal level (*Orfeo-TV* in Bologna, *Anelli Mancanti* in Florence, *In Sù-TV* in Naples) or at national level (NoWar-TV project). In the deployment of these last national mobilizations, the Internet becomes the "ideal platform for the realization of more or less extended networks, similar in some cases to real communities, that connect people with very different origins" (Mascio, 2008, p.150). Even more than in the experiences of the G8 in Genova 2001 and of the European Social Forum, held in Florence in the 2002, the *Girotondi* season showed the consolidation and the consecration of the Internet as a new collective space for citizens participation. Although the *Girotondi* is a kind of elite mobilization, expressing the concerns of the 'reflexive medium ranks', according to one of its opinion leaders and speakers. However, the participants to these demonstrations were ideologically more heterogeneous, than those who took part in the alter-mondialist and pacifist movements.

The efficient use of the new media made by the *Girotondi* and the participation of leading intellectuals strengthened the ability of the movement to shape the agenda of the media (Mascio, 2008, p.168). This effect appears to be helped by

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1 As known, Indymedia is the widest global network of independent media around the world, developed since Seattle 1999.. The Italian project grew up at the beginning of the new decade, mostly from previous networks of media activists.

the political-communicational general context, characterized by a high level of dramatization of the dialectic government-movements, in parallel with a scarce stress on the debate between government and opposition. It is the interaction among these factors, rather than the mere opportunity made available by technologies, that allows to be heard in the mass public sphere. Even a wide network of online communication may become insufficient to overcome the mainstream barriers, as the experience of the feminist movements demonstrates (Leonardi 2001; Nardi 2002). A recent national protest event in Rome focused on the fight against violence on women was launched in Italy in November 2007, using e-mails and SMS; but it had a narrow and distorted coverage on the mainstream media. Other demonstrations, like those made by 'flexible' or precarious workers (Mattoni, 2008) and by homosexuals (Trappolin, 2008) had a similar distorted coverage.

In sum, we can agree with Sebastiani (2008, p.11), who said that the Internet plays a "subsidiary communicative function" for movements, civic committees, associations, informal groups who can produce relevant public discourses only if they have the resources for accessing the political-institutional arena and also the traditional media. The Internet does not guarantee the automatic creation of a renewed public sphere, more inclusive and horizontal, neither an egalitarian and dialogical relationship with the other components of the public sphere (traditional media, political system, public opinion). Nevertheless, it is also true that the picture seems to become even more complex and ambivalent due to the more recent technological and social developments.

4 Web 2.0: from strategic resource to a new routine? Fragmentation and re-aggregation of online public sphere

After the alter-mondialist mobilizations and the *Girotondi*, with the increasing diffusion of Internet access (that rose from about 22% of families in 2000 up to a bit over 40% in the 2003) (Sartori, 2006, p.333), the web has entered, also in Italy, among the usual instruments adopted by mobilized citizens and groups for inside and outside communication. While citizens leave the online institutional forum because of the lack of a direct and public debate with the administrations, other online non-institutional autonomous places of interaction are built by grassroots groups, densifying the local online sphere "far from the municipalities networks" (Freschi, 2008). Nearly all the most important local mobilizations in Italy in the latest years (for example those against the building of the big high speed trains infrastructures in Val di Susa (Northwestern Italy) and in Tuscany, known as *No-TAV* movement; or those against the enlargement of the NATO military base in Vicenza, *No-Dal Molin*), rely not only on strong localized

network of grassroots groups, but also on the relationships fostered by the web among the movements' networks, included the new media activism, grown up in the previous two-years of the alter-mondialist Italian mobilizations. Among these new generations of grassroots experiences, which seem to have integrated the use of the new media in their tool-case, EuroMayday, rooted in Italy among the emerging components of the high as well as de-qualified services sector, mainly in cities like Milan or Rome, deserves a peculiar attention for its deconstructive potential of the mainstream media codes. This network of precarious workers, due to the prevailing cultural and educational backgrounds of its social basis, aims to express a radical criticism towards both trade unionism and the mainstream communication, by means of the adoption of strategies that interfere with the commercial flows, especially in the business sectors at high symbolic intensity. An example is the creation of the brand Serpica Naro, a mysterious *maison d'haute couture*, which was able to force the narrow selective filter of the media coverage on the international fashion show in Milan (Freschi & Raffini, 2008).

With the diffusion of the Web 2.0, the relationship between the emergence of a wider virtual public sphere, crowded by an increasing number of individuals and new mobilized groups, and the mass media sphere is still problematic. The commercial colonization of the virtual sphere makes less easy to interfere with the mass media agenda. Therefore, active citizens find the new media a useful instrument for networking, sharing knowledge and information, rather than for affecting the media agenda and consequently the political agenda. According to the latest Technorati research on the state of the blogosphere, it emerges that, over the total number of posts in the world, the Italian ones rose to the 4th position, after those in Japanese, English and Chinese (Sifry, 2007; Mediameter-Wordpress, 2007). The blogosphere shows not only the strong demand of self expression by individuals, but also the need to get and give alternative, un-intermediated, individualized information to the mainstream market-oriented one. Examples of this are: the boom of warblogs and personal journalism after the 9/11 attacks; the diffusion of blogs and war diaries, written by soldiers in Iraq and journalists not embedded with the fighting troops (like Enzo Baldoni[1]), or in cases of "widespread emergency" as in the aftermath of the Tsunami in South-East Asia (De Rosa, 2007; Sofi, 2006).

Blogs seem to answer to a new ethical need within professional journalism, as well as to a strategy of building individual reputation and visibility in order to better compete on the new information online market. The quick and widespread diffusion of blogs and citizen journalism has provoked contrasting and polarized reactions. According to some observers and bloggers, positive and cooperating synergies may emerge between traditional journalism and the new forms of web-journalism. A journalistic "re-mediation" is already partially in progress:

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1 Italian journalist and blogger, correspondent of the weekly "Diario" to Iraq who was kidnapped and killed during the summer 2004.

mainstream media use some blogs as sources; some bloggers check the honesty and transparency of traditional information and they write also for newspapers and magazines; the professional journalism would maintain its prerogatives of interpreting the complexity of society, as citizens journalism tend to adopt a more partial point of view (Sofi, 2006, p.20; Spina, 2006, p.496). Both mainstream media and the blogosphere continue mainly to be self-referential. When investigating the relationship between traditional journalism and online journalism, Fortunati and Sarrica (2006, pp.524-526) found out that the professional journalists (who write for the newspapers) distrust the Internet and think also that both citizen and "self-made journalism" will never be "real journalism". Milič, Marchetto and Costa (2007), when surveying 5.000 Italian authors and readers of blogs through an online questionnaire focused on the relations between blogs and the public sphere, put in evidence an analogous self-referential trend, combined with growing mutual suspicion. Moreover, the majority of respondents declared to trust more the authoritative/influential blogs, than the traditional newspapers, notwithstanding it is still mostly the mass media agenda that shapes the one of the blogs. Nevertheless, the processes of "internetization" of the traditional information and "mediatization" of the web proceed, both in the virtuous and vicious meanings, in "circular and synergic" ways (Spina, 2006, p.498; Fortunati & Sarrica, 2006). For example, inside the blogosphere the social problems of unequal distribution of scarce resources are not vanished, both in terms of the attention obtainable from the citizens and from the mainstream media or the institutional actors, in a context of an overload of information (De Rosa, 2006). In this perspective, the blogosphere situation of endemic competition for the attention and the communicative strategies of bloggers and blogs does not diverge much from those of the mainstream media, especially over a certain number of comments for post.

The main problem remains the fact that the Italian mass media system and the political-institutional arena seem not to be currently affected by the blogosphere, which is lacking in modifying the mainstream agenda (De Rosa 2006, p.148). An exception to this rule is the blog of the comedian Beppe Grillo[1], opened in January 2005. His blog is the most popular Italian blog, the third more visited information website, with an average of 160.000 contacts per day (Technorati ranks it 18th in a list of more 70 million of blogs in the world)[2]. The Internet has been used also to create local meet-ups: currently the Grillo's meet-up network counts about 200 units, in more than 150 towns, also outside Italy (Navarria, 2007). The posts about the more recent campaigns proposed by Grillo, as *Parlamento Pulito*[3] and *Le Primarie dei Cittadini*[1] received each thousands of

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1 www.beppegrillo.it

2 In 2005 the Times included Grillo between the 37 "European heroes" of the year, because of the critical and un-conformist communicational style and the ability to provoke and inspire the public opinion, bloggers and readers.

3 Translation: Clean Parliament www.parlamentopulito.com

comments. The campaigns and mobilizations promoted by Grillo are characterized by a strong integration between offline actions – like meetings and events which take place simultaneously in different towns, big shows, visits to local communities claiming on specific issues – and the use of the new digital media. Moreover, Grillo's initiatives aim at connecting clearly the movement's initiatives with the institutional available democratic instruments (petitions, laws proposed by the citizens, referendum, class actions). In the same perspective, Grillo organized some big events in conjunction with important national celebrations (like the anniversaries of the 8th September 1943 and of the 25th April 1945, the Italian Liberation from the Nazi occupation): it seems not only a matter of attracting the biggest participation, but also an answer to the need of connecting the protest to the public sphere and locating one's own political proposal in a symbolic space, from where the institutional political actors seem in retreat. The first political initiative with a strong echo was *Parlamento pulito* launched online in June 2005 to shed light on the high number of people under investigation or condemned in the Italian Parliament[2]. The 8th of September 2007 Grillo organized the so called *V-day per un Parlamento pulito*: 50.000 persons attended the meeting with the comedian in Bologna, while in 200 Italian squares and public spaces in various towns, and in 30 towns abroad, 300.000 signatures were collected for the petition campaign to propose a popular law on this issue. During the 23-25th of April 2008 "V2 day", 500 self-organized groups in several Italian cities collected 1.500.000 signatures in three days in order to propose three referenda to reform the Italian media and journalistic system; the slogan was "free information in free state". As Grillo commented, "it [this extraordinary number of signatures collected] never happened in the history of the Republic in such a short period of time". The success of the mobilization promoted by Grillo's organization depended on a mix of elements: the ability to intercept the increasing delusion and mistrust towards the political class and mainstream media; the contribution provided by the wide range of communications channels, deployed in the building of local groups and in the promotion of timely, content rich and incisive campaigns; the experimentation of the newest digital services and the rediscovery of basic participation forms (grassroots local groups). This experience shows also some problematic traits in continuity with the usual political dynamics. High personalization of the leadership and some problems like the scarce accountability, transparency and representation of Grillo's blog have already been underlined by Navarria (2007); even "the friends of Beppe Grillo" noticed some lack of interaction within the inner circle in straight contact with Grillo, when some strategic and important decisions for the whole movement are concerned. There are also some other limits in the participation quality, which

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1 Translation: Citizens' Primaries www.beppegrillo.it/grillonews.html

2 In the XIV Legislature (2001-2006) there were 25 people condemned with final judgment, even if not all of them for serious crimes as corruption.

reflect some features of the Italian society. For example, the analysis on the online communication and on the participants to the meet-up shows a weak presence of women, but this is true also for those issues as public health, environmental preservation, wellbeing of future generations which women are traditionally more involved in (Carroll, 2001). The scarce active presence of women on the Grillo's website is in contrast with the fact that, at least among the young generations, women are those who blog more (Milič *et al.*, 2007). The Grillo's style of communication, characterized by the adoption of a male-centred slang (which is not so rare in the Italian political communication) may have contributed to this feature. Finally, for some aspects, Grillo doesn't use some typical networking functions: comparing Grillo's Blog to some other Italian blogs, it emerges that there are less links to external websites and other bloggers, and there is not a real interaction between the blogger and the citizens who comment his posts, also as a consequence of the high number of comments from citizens (thousands for each post launched by Grillo).

In conclusion, notwithstanding some inner limits, the forms of online participation in Italy in the last 10 years have shown a quantitative and qualitative extension. The most incisive experiences in terms of identity building as well as in terms of reaching the general public, however, have been characterized by the integration of online and offline communicational and organizational dimensions, exploiting both the emerging political opportunities and the usual spectacular logic to interfere with the agenda of the media mainstream public sphere.

5 Testing reversed techno-politics

Among the recent Italian experiences promoted by non-institutional actors, aiming to influence significantly the institutional dynamics, which obtained similar, even if not identical, interest compared to the Grillo case, stand out two projects of the nonprofit association DEPP (Electronic Democracy and Public Participation): *OpenPolis* and *VoiSieteQui*[1]. The interest to these projects is due to their attempt to reverse the logic underlying the combination of political marketing, polls and ICTs adopted by the political-institutional actors. Rodotà (1997) defined "techno-politics" this scenario of making the citizens passive sources of feedbacks towards the political dominant actors, by means of a continuous use of polls, the fragmentation of the citizenship sovereignty and the sterilization of the dialogic-deliberative opportunities. It deals with a use of the new media that is limited to the exploitation of their potential of challenging a fragmented and atomized political demand. The digital practices, proposed by the

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1 The assessment of these projects is based on: the analysis of the web sites Voisietequi (www.voisietequi.it) and OpenPolis (www.openpolis.it). The analysis consists of the debates developed in blogs, mailing lists, forums, and on the mainstream websites which published news about the projects and in depth interviews to the creators and managers of the projects.

two projects here analyzed, try to favor reflexive processes among citizens and political actors by means of upsetting their roles within the "game" of techno-politics.

During the 2006 campaign, Voisietequi proposed an online poll that asked the Internet users to express their preferences (on a scale of different positions from "I strongly agree" to "I strongly disagree") about a set of political issues, selected as crucial in the general electoral campaign. Based on a comparison with the official positions of the parties, the poll allowed the users to measure their proximity or distance from the various parties on the given political space, through a graph used in the social sciences and realized applying the Multi Dimensional Scaling (MDS) technique. In 2006 the parties' positions on 25 issues were defined consulting nearly 1.000 sources, ranging from the electoral programs to the leaders' public declarations. 730,000 users completed the test in this first edition. Voisietequi obtained a high resonance mainly thanks to the word of mouth and the coverage of the mass media, which interpreted it as an interesting and light innovation in the context of an electoral campaign which was characterized by acrimonious and hard tones. As the president of the promoting association interviewed said, "Voisietequi fits in the strategic scenario of OpenPolis", which aimed at developing in Italy an instrument similar to the British "they-work-for-you"[1] - a tool for getting information and for checking the declarations and the activities of politicians at different levels – and "publicwhip"[2], a source of information on the voting decisions taken by the parliamentarians. On the other hand, such an instrument can become a useful source of information for the politicians themselves and the media. The creation of a relevant database of information on the activities of the local and national politicians (more than 130.000 Italian elected representatives, from local to European institutions) is based on the contribution of the citizens themselves, but also of journalists, associations, and professional politicians registered to the community of the users of the service. They were invited to "adopt" one or more politicians, to accurately keep track of the activities of these politicians and to post news on the website, always making references to the sources (press statements, interviews, etc). This is the most interesting and problematic aspect of the project because it requires an active role of the participants and a large "critical mass" of contributors. The great interest stimulated by Voisietequi nourished the community OpenPolis, both in 2006 and in the further experience occurred in the electoral campaign for 2008. This anticipated general elections – in which the political supply seemed quickly and to a large extent modified, but not less confused for the partial break up of the former coalitions – aroused strong expectations for the new edition of the poll. The same day the test was available online, the Corriere della Sera (one of the main national newspapers) published the news on its website, and after that the

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1 www.theyworkforyou.com

2 www.publicwhip.org.uk

site was not available for a while because too many users were trying to access it. The news spread immediately on the Internet, starting from the bloggers. The prompt publicity of the site and the huge diffusion in terms of visited pages (the number of contacts, about two millions, is comparable to those of the large commercial channels) are the first elements of interest. The 2008 edition extends the role of the participants. During a first stage, the users could choose the political issues they considered most important (users proposed and voted the issues according to their salience, then made a ranking, and finally the editorial board picked up 25 questions). At the same time a mailing list opened the discussion. In the second stage, the selected questions were sent to the political parties, which were invited to provide their positions on the issues. During the last period, citizens could complete the test. Despite being online fewer days than the first edition (14 days against 21), about 800.000 people filled in the test in 2008. The communication style adopted was playful and ironic: "Got lost in the electoral campaign? ORIENTATE YOURSELF!". Through the flow created by e-mailing the personal among the users, started online processes of comparison among participants who discuss the results, the pertinence of the questions, not foreseen proximities and distances. For these reasons, the experience differs clearly from the market-services of voter/party profiling that started to spread in Italy since 2006 (Bentivegna, 2006).
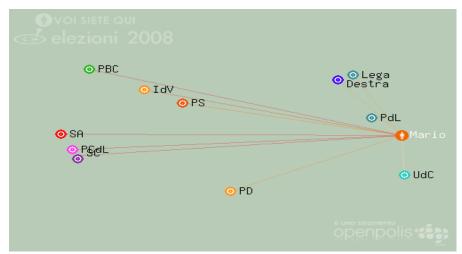
Figure 1. Party positioning of Mario, user of the test www.voisietequi.it, for the 2008 Italian general elections.

Voisietequi unleashed a very intense debate on the Internet, on its-own website and in the wider Italian blogsphere, in the forums, in the mailing lists or through single emails. The opportunity offered by Voisietequi to send one's personal graph by email (with the subject: "Io sono qui", [I am here]) or to post it on one's own blog created a triggering effect: other citizens did the test and sent their graph to friends and acquaintances. The graphs comparison was often the reason for stimulating political informal debates. On the one hand, the test tried to activate the relational function using the instruments of forwarding; on the other hand Voisietequi promoters aimed also at providing a service of information for the citizens and forcing somehow the parties to express an opinion on the same issues on which citizens are usually called to respond. The participatory elaboration of the questionnaire thus aimed at selecting the more relevant issues of the electoral campaign, having in mind an average voter, not very well informed. By the project side there was the plain awareness that selecting only 25 questions would inevitably imply a simplification, which nevertheless could be different from the simplification of the television because of the opportunities of free interaction and debate.

What kind of influence this 'game' may have on real politics, other than to discuss the use of the poll as a political instrument and to build a debate flow, mainly among friends? Analyzing the discussions triggered by Voisietequi on forums, mailing lists and blogs, a variety of uses emerges. This game seems to stimulate the breaking down of cognitive routines as far as political opinions are concerned, even though it does not influence directly the decision of vote. Many users appreciated the test but declared they would not decide to vote according to its result: that was a game and they have their own opinions. By encouraging the users to debate not only on their profile but also on the used tool and its limits, Voisietequi deconstructed in a easy-going way a typical form of contemporary politics, the poll, which usually remains armoured in the abstract public sphere of the media. In the process of defining the 2008 edition, it emerged also a further interesting dynamic related to the reactions of the party system. According to the

president of the association DEPP, the parties, when responding to the questions, "accepted somehow the simplification of the game, and accepted to position themselves, something that is not granted especially in Italy where politicians seldom accept "actual" questions, not previously agreed with journalists; moreover traditional talk shows permit ambiguous answers. […] In this case, the simplification constrained the party to position itself on a very clear scale, ranging from strongly in favour to strongly against" (Bentivegna, 2006). This simplification is the same to which citizens who respond to opinion polls are constrained and used. Out of twelve parties, nine accepted immediately to reply, three refused (La Destra, the centre party UDC and Il Partito Democratico).

In this experience there were also some limits, if the promoters' aims and the obtained results are compared. In fact, only few citizens who did the game-test got involved in the interaction of the projects *Voisietequi* and *OpenPolis*; the dialogic processes triggered by the test included only an elite; the cooperative process of creating the informative database had many practical problems in terms of quantity, continuity and quality of the contributions. For these reasons the promoters are trying to establish new forms of cooperation with other associations, like for example territorial organizations, which have the appropriate informative and organizational resources and can also favour the development of the project offline.

6 Conclusion: The persisting gap between virtual sphere and mass general public sphere

Since the '90s the Internet has become in Italy, especially for the new social movements and groups of self-organized citizens, at local, national and supranational level, a strategic instrument to spread out alternative information, to challenge the mass media agenda, to self-coordinate and build new relationships and identities. The main research findings about Italy show that communication and organization styles remain more shaped by cultural and organizational routes of the different groups and by the traits of the communicational and political context than by the new media opportunities. Moreover, it is not clear if the Internet can attract political participation of citizens who are not already active. According to a detailed survey (Cellini *et al.*, 2007) on the citizens involved in an Italian relevant institutional deliberative e-experience, there is a strong direct relation between being politically active and the use of Internet (over 90% of the participants were connected and over 70% daily). It is also well known that the contrary is not true: being online doesn't mean to engage in social and political participation.

The development of online participation contributed to shape a virtual public sphere, in a problematic relation/tension with the offline general public sphere,

coping with the dominant logic of techno-politics. Relevant mobilizations of socially disadvantaged or conflictual subjectivities mobilized by means of the Internet may disappear in the off-Internet media realm, if there aren't resources, external to the Internet, to enter the general public sphere. Nevertheless, some niches of new practices aiming to deconstruct the dominant logic of techno-politics have been identified as interesting cases in terms of building discursive relationships among the citizens-participants, although some limits under a participatory perspective emerged. The synergy of the two analysed online projects, OpenPolis and *VoiSietequi*, represents an attempt of: a) strengthening the democratic control by the citizens on the political representatives, administrators and parties, reversing the channelling potential enabled by the ICTs in a new form of shared production of contents, accredited by official sources, but also allowing forms of communitarian lobbying based on political detailed maps built up by the citizens themselves; b) reversing the direction of the simplification's pressure that the poll usually exercises on the citizens; c) breaking up the verticality and the uni-directionality of the poll's mechanism and promoting the creation of relationships among the respondents, the participatory elaboration of the questionnaire, and the discussion of the results. Doing this, the two projects aim at favouring a public and shared disclosure of the techno-politics functioning, putting them at citizens' disposal. However, these projects addressed its criticism to the functioning of techno-politics, up to now, mainly internally to the political agenda shaped by the institutional actors, highlighting its inner contradictions and short-circuits (and thus it was not concerned with the creation of dedicated spaces for the emergence of an alternative agenda of the participating citizens, even tough this could occur as an effect of the free interactions among the participants). The agenda power held by the mainstream media (i.e. televisions and national newspapers) appears again unchallenged; it is threatened only under very extraordinary circumstances, and it seems to require a sort of isomorphic spectacular strategy. This remains today the crucial problem for the emersion of citizens' participation from the virtual sphere towards the general public sphere.

The "Internet-based" virtual public sphere may be conceived as a third dimension of a higher differentiated public sphere, along with the "media-based" abstract public sphere, and with the face-to-face public sphere (Rasmussen, 2007, p.4). This process of stratification of the public sphere is, however, very problematic. "Due to the proliferation of personal media among individuals, they are used mostly as channels for citizens activity in the civil sphere and in everyday life. The heterogeneity of Internet communication stands in a dynamic relationship with the homogeneity of the mainstream mass media" (*ivi*, p.14), as the high fragmentation of the virtual sphere seems to coincide with a strong homologation of the mass public sphere.

In this context of fragmentation and densification of the virtual sphere, to which highly asymmetric actors contribute and where the informational overload

increases, some problems become even more apparent and urgent: the online visibility of the weaker actors and thus their opportunity of networking and mobilizing, and the ability to influence the mass public sphere's agenda. The problematic nature of the relationship between mass media system and virtual sphere seems again to be one of the main constrains to the empowerment of the citizens role, by means of the new media, in the production and reshaping of the public sphere according to the principles of true openness, inclusiveness and deliberation. The Italian context, because of its peculiarities – the highly concentrated media system and its ties with the political institutional powers, the unstable political party system, the variety and density of participative initiatives by the citizens, who actively recur to the new media, and the increasing attention of the political institutions towards e-democracy tools – could be a terrain worth special attention in the next years.

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Challenges and prospects of e-participation in Bulgaria

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Abstract. A lot of research has recently been done in the field of e-participation but little attention has been paid to transitional democracies. As a country in transition Bulgaria is an interesting case which needs to be further investigated. The aim of the paper is to give an overview of the current attitudes towards political participation in Bulgaria and the possible influence of ICT on it. Thus the two research questions examined are: *What opinions do young Bulgarians have regarding political participation offline and online?* and *How can ICT be used to promote political participation among them?* To answer this, a web-survey was conducted the results of which showed that: 1) Young people in Bulgaria are not very politically active aside from the voting which is viewed as a way to give voice to one's opinion. The lack of motivation is ascribed to the perceived level of corruption. 2) Skepticism and mistrust in the governing authorities can be fought with them actively encouraging and participating in deliberations with citizens. An online approach to this seems to be favored. 3) It can be said that online political activity will mirror the offline one and will focus on voting.

1 Introduction: Why e-participation in Bulgaria?

In the last years some have claimed that representative democracy is in a crisis or perhaps in transformation (for example Putnam, 2000 and Dalton, 2002). Many believe technology has the potential to solve this crisis while others hold the opposite view. That is why a lot of research has been done in the recent years in the field of e-participation with more and more attention being paid on the social,

rather than on the technical, aspect of the Internet-enabled citizens' participation (for example see articles in Gehring, 2004).

After searching through a number of search engines and databases for academic journals and publications we noted that the focus of these research has been either on Western countries with stable democracies or on the developing countries of Asia and Africa which has lead to the ex-Soviet countries in transition being somewhat left out. Bulgaria is a perfect example of that group of countries, for which enough knowledge on the challenges and prospects of e-participation is lacking. With the country joining the European Union (EU) last year, the need for that knowledge has become even more pressing.

Some assessments on the country's e-readiness have been made and some research have been done but it all concerns the provision of e-services and is made predominantly from an administrative point of view. The citizens' point of view and the social perspective is lacking and this paper makes a step towards filling this knowledge gap.

The series of reports released by the ARC Fund[1] in association with Vitosha Research shows a lasting and clear tendency towards increased use of the Internet by those who have access to PCs (51% in 2003 and 54% in 2005) (ARC fund, 2004, 2005 and 2006). In the past few years the number of people declaring they have access to Internet and have been using it ever more frequently has increased several-fold. Main reasons for using the Internet are information gathering, entertainment, accessing alternative resources of world news and personal communication. The total volume of web sites of public institutions and organizations is growing steadily (ARC Fund, 2002).

In the year 2001 the first Bulgarian blog was created. Nowadays most of the major Bulgarian portals offer free options for creating blogs. For now the creation of blogs is done solely by private citizens (ARC fund, 2006: 28).

For the period January 2004-April 2005, 24 online campaigns on subjects concerning the entire nation were started. The majority of the campaigns had a concrete country policy as an aim – 42%, while 13 % were political and 17 % on environmental matters. The most preferred way for carrying out the campaigns was online petition by name – 55%. Of all the campaigns 13 were initiated by NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations) and one was started by a specific online community (ARC fund, 2006: 29, fig.21).

All these facts give hope that employing Internet tools for participation can be expected to have a positive effect on fighting the political apathy which is witnessed in the country and which is easily explained by the distrust in the political system created by the high corruption levels. In their 2007 report

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1 "Applied Research and Communications (ARC) Fund (www.arc.online.bg) is a leading Bulgarian NGO working in the areas of information society and innovation. Vitosha Research (www.online.bg/vr) specializes in social and opinion research. Vitosha Research regularly monitors Internet usage in Bulgaria since 1998." (ARC Fund, 2002:4)

Freedom House[3] gives the corruption a score of 3.75. This is viewed as posing rather big problems for the democracy in the country and is the main aspect that brings the overall democracy rating higher – to 2.89 – for which reason Bulgaria is considered to be a "nation in transit" (Freedom House, 2007: 185).

The above mentioned reports show that the websites of non-governmental organizations, online computer distributors, and government institutions are the least popular, none of the online campaigns were initiated by governmental organizations and no governmental institutions use the blogs as means of communicating ideas. At the same time, the percentage of people whose most frequent online activity and interest was politics drops from 12 % in the year 2001 to 5% in the year 2003 (ARC Fund, 2004: 27, table 6).

Everything that was said so far raises the question why the steadily increasing levels of Internet usage and ICT penetration, as low as they may be compared to other EU countries, are not used for engaging citizens, especially the young ones, in political participation and for boosting democracy. And while the government strategies in the field for now try to deal with the legal framework, the survey presented in this article focuses on the attitudes of the young people towards the use of Internet tools for policy making and their impact on democracy. Thus the two research questions are:

1) What opinions do young Bulgarians have regarding political participation offline and online?
2) How can ICT be used to promote political participation among young people in Bulgaria?

The answers to these questions will give an overview of the attitudes of young people in Bulgaria towards political participation and how, if at all possible, Internet tools can be employed for promoting it. This in turn will hopefully stir the interest towards the country leading to further research. Assessing the issue from the young citizens' point of view rather than from the administrative one gives an insight of the problem which, along with deeper research, can lead to the formation of very concrete recommendations for measures to be taken, especially at a local governmental level, in order to stir the political engagement of citizens and fight corruption practices by openness and transparency. The attitudes towards political participation are mapped according to the models of democracy and the concept of nodality (which are presented in the theory section). These concepts are used as tools to nuance the form of ICT facilitated participation desired by citizens.

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3 Freedom House is a non-governmental organization that assesses the degree of democratic freedom in countries. Freedom House does annual reports on freedom in the world where countries are rated on several aspects with a score from 1 (most free/democratic) to 7 (least free/democratic). (Freedom House, 2008)

The survey which was carried out is explained and analyzed in the following sections of this article. The analysis first discusses separately the attitudes towards offline and online political participation. Then it assesses the influence ICT may have on stirring young people's interest in political participation.

2 Theory: democracy models and nodality

This section presents the main theoretical lenses through which the analysis of the survey results is reflected. It also gives our view on some main concepts whose single-valued definitions are still a subject of discussions.

2.1 Governmental nodality

According to Hood and Margetts (2007) one can view governments as a tool to extract information from the citizens as they interface with them. In this paper we will focus on nodality - the property of being in the middle of a social network (Hood & Margetts, 2007: 21). It is a major issue for governments today due to the fact that government websites are not necessarily the first place where citizens look for information (Hood & Margetts, 2007: 48). Issues such as visibility, accessibility and competitiveness are determining for whether or not a government websites achieves nodality among the many different competing websites (Hood & Margetts, 2007: 141-142, 185). Because of this, general opinions or "requirements" from citizens are vital when developing options for online political participation. If it is the governments wish to provide a service that will give bottom-up involvement (by a top-down initiative) it is therefore vital that these options are nodal. The question is whether the civil society in a country is strong enough to bring forth forums for discussion and political information online or if this is something that is expected from the government (Hood & Margetts, 2007: 187-192). This will be discussed in the end of this paper as the opinions of Bulgarian citizens are presented.

2.2 E-democracy

Herein we use the democracy categories discussed by Åström (2001). Democracy is divided into three levels where the citizens have different roles. Thin democracy focuses on information acquisition and provision, quick democracy refers to direct participation in decision making and a strong democracy focuses on deliberation (Åström, 2001: 51). In the online context these categories are in line with the three levels of e-participation discussed below under *E-participation*. This model is later on used to define the present and the desired-by-citizens state of e-democracy in Bulgaria.

2.3 Political participation

With the existing discussions on what political participation is, we hold the opinion that political participation is not only limited to parliamentary politics such as voting in parliament and local elections as well as in referenda, campaigning in elections or being a member of a political party but also includes the following activities: discussing politics (either with politicians or with friends), active support of non-governmental organizations (NGO), protests, strikes as well as taking part in any form of community actions (Birch, 2001).

2.4 E-participation

The definition of e-participation herein focuses not only on the technological aspects but also on the social impact that this might have in regards to broadening and deepening the inclusion of citizens in the political process. This should be viewed not only as government to citizen (G2C) but also as citizen to citizen (C2C) communication, as discussed by Macintosh (2006).

The OECD framework differentiates between three levels of e-participation: information – a one way relation in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens; consultation – a two way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government; participation – a relation based on partnership with government in which citizens actively engage in the policy making process (Medaglia, 2007).

3 Exploring e-participation in Bulgaria

3.1 Methodology

This article is based on a questionnaire survey and a literature study. The survey was in the form of online questionnaire which was sent in direct e-mail to 180 people, all students in the University of Economics in Varna. It was also distributed in a snowball manner among students in the St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia and was posted on a discussion board in facebook.com in the Bulgaria network. For a period of 2 weeks (5:th – 19:th of March, 2008) 113 responses were collected with 30 people skipping questions 5 to 8. Besides the standard demographic questions, the questionnaire included multiple choice questions on present offline and online political participation as well as some questions on attitudes and opinions on online politics. The questions were based on the categories listed in 2.3 (see above).

An online questionnaire was chosen as a method due to the aim of collecting as many responses as possible in order to draw general conclusions about young

educated Bulgarians' opinions and attitudes. It was also considered appropriate due to the anonymity it secures since the respondents were asked about their opinions on more or less political matters. One downside to using questionnaires is that one might miss out on important views the respondents might have but do not have the possibility to express in the limited and structured questionnaire (Bryman, 2004: 133-135). This limitation was countered by providing a space for comments after the closed questions as well as by some open ended questions.

The comments which are used as examples throughout the text were selected after coding the data in the open-ended questions into categories. A representative quote for each of the categories is presented to give a fruitful picture of the opinions that were expressed.

3.2 Challenges and limitations

Due to the project time limitations the questionnaire was not preliminary tested for which reason it showed some flaws which should be eliminated in further studies. A design mistake left the option of exiting the survey before completing it which is the reason for some respondents filling only the first couple of questions in.

The questionnaire was distributed in Bulgarian thus the responses were in Bulgarian as well. It should be taken into account that some nuances in the open-ended responses might be lost in translation. Besides this the translation was done by one of this article's authors, who understands Bulgarian. Although the author tried to stay close to the original opinion of respondents there might also some subtle distinction between the translation and original ones. The translation was done in a direct manner, to come closer to the original statement, which in some cases means that correct sentences are not as important as meaning.

4 A brief presentation of the results

In order to give an unbiased picture of the present offline as well as online political activity among the respondents, the statistical data is presented in this section without any comments.

4.1 Demographic characteristics

The average age of the respondents is 23 years (median: 22) with only 3 of all the 113 being over 35 years of age. The young age of the respondents explains why 63 % of them are still in university or college. The other 41 people have graduated from university or college and only 1 of the respondents has only secondary or high school education. These demographic characteristics of the sample make it possible to label it as representative of young educated people in Bulgaria.

4.2 Offline political activities

The political activities which are the most practiced by the respondents are voting and discussions with friends. Voting in parliament elections is practiced by 88% of the respondents and 77 % has voted at least once in local elections. The activity which is the most appealing for future participation in is the voting in a referendum as 64 % have never voted in one but intend to do it. Another activity which is appealing for future practice is community actions.

The activities which are the least appealing to the respondents are membership in a political party (81 % has never been a member and do not intend to become one) and participation in official political discussions with 66 % answering they have never done it and do not intend to.

4.3 Online political activities

The most practiced activity is the information search - 66% of the respondents have visited the official government site in search of information, 74% have searched information in NGOs' sites and 77% in local governments' official sites. The second most practiced online political activity is the signing of a petition as 44% of the respondents have signed a petition online. The activity which the respondents are the most willing to practice if there was such a possibility is voting – 77% would vote online in referenda and local elections and 70% would vote online in parliament elections. The activities which the respondents are the most unwilling to practice are the creation of own political blogs and the discussion of political matters in a forum without a politician.

Besides their current political behavior, the respondents were asked about their opinion on some general statements on online politics. The answers to most of the questions are quite evenly distributed between somewhat agree and somewhat disagree so it is hard to make any solid conclusion on whether the respondents as a group agree or disagree with them. What can be said is that the majority of the respondents agree that more people will take part in voting as well as in discussions if these activities were in an online form.

Young people are generally skeptical to the suggestion that their opinion has greater chances of being taken into account if it was expressed online – 53% of the respondents somewhat or strongly disagree with that statement. At the same time 38% are willing to discuss issues in a forum with a politician. In the next section we discuss these contradictions and explain the results using the data gathered from the open ended questions as well as the theoretical models which were already discussed.

5 Analysis

5.1 Offline participation

The results show that young people in Bulgaria are very active in voting contrary to the widespread opinion of their political apathy. They are also willing to vote in referenda, which shows their desire to take an active and direct part in the decision making processes in the country. Voting, as means of stating one's views and taking a position, is considered essential because "*Inactivity is the most stupid action according to me, as far as elections are concerned [...] But I would not call myself a very active citizen, I do the minimum of what is required*". Those who have a negative attitude towards voting tend to motivate their opinion with the statement that voting, or the representative system as a whole for that matter, in Bulgaria is corrupt; "*I am not particularly interested in politics, in Bulgaria it is hard to talk about politics – only lies. That is why I do not engage in things I do not understand and I think most of the people should do the same*". In this statement there is also a claim about the individuals' own political abilities and for the abilities of the public representatives as a whole, making the distrust in politicians evident. Bearing in mind that in Bulgaria the tendency is towards politicians, especially the ones occupying top positions like ministers etc, being perceived as persons rather than as representatives of a certain party ideology, public distrust poses a serious problem: "*I think that nowadays there are not many public persons who are worth voting for and who are worth following*".

Aside from the voting and the friendly discussions the other activities which comprise the list of active political participation are not that popular among the respondents. The most unappealing one is the membership in political parties which is often associated with corruption, frauds and misdoings. As one of the respondents puts it: "*I think that like many other people I find politics something dirty and that is why I would not actively participate in the political life of the country…*". The opinions are the same regarding the campaigning in elections. Even the ones that are willing to take part in such campaigns or are interested in becoming a member of a political party would do it because: "*… if this would be to my advantage…*". This statement perfectly illustrates the general attitude towards the political situation in the country. Viewing political party matters as "dirty" may explain why young people are not willing to engage in such activities but why are they unwilling to take part in activities which concern them directly and which affect their everyday lives, such as public discussion? Reasons for this can be that they are held in inconvenient times or information about when and where they are held is scarce. But the main reason seems to be that respondents do not believe their opinion will be regarded and here corruption, manipulations etc. come in the picture again. Surveys show that citizens do not believe that problem-

solving, especially at the local level, depends on them being active. The main non-governmental representatives taking part in consultative processes are representatives of business unions followed by NGOs with the number of civil associations being very small. (Delcheva, 2005: 91) Another reason for non-participation can be that citizens see no results when they participate. The public poll on the provision of administrative services shows that in the majority of the cases the outcome of a proposal or complaint has been no answer and no measures or an answer but no measures taken. (Delcheva, 2005: 91)

With some concern it should be noted that the number of the respondents who actively support NGOs or take part in various community activities is also very small. This may mean two things. First, that there is no clear society consciousness developed yet and second, that the public trust in NGOs in Bulgaria is very low. NGOs unpopularity can be explained with the stereotypes formed in the beginning of the transition period when the public learned about illegal activities conducted behind the cover of NGOs (Delcheva, 2005: 91). Their activity and communication with the authorities is additionally hindered by constantly changing legislation.

Still, there is a ray of light since a considerable percentage of the young people are willing to support NGOs in the future, main arguments for which are to avoid corruption: *"I would not engage in matters with political connotations because according to me the ideas of the party groups have mutated. That is why the society should express their positions and opinions in a non-governmental way."* So it can be seen that NGOs are viewed as an alternative to the government or even to politics and that is the main driving force for their support.

To sum up the offline political participation in Bulgaria, it can be said that young people are not very active aside from the voting which is viewed as a way to give voice to one's opinion. As one of the respondents puts it *"the only way to be politically active in Bulgaria is to vote"*. A reason for avoiding further involvement is the perceived level of corruption. It seems that some responsibility is felt as far as selecting the governance goes. From that stage on the selected governance is expected to take care of the citizens: *"... we elect the governing authorities but the governing authorities decide our lives..."*

5.2 Attitudes towards online participation

It is worth noting that quite a few of the respondents are willing to use participation options such as e-mail to politicians and sign up for receiving e-mails when decisions relevant to them are taken. This gives rise to the question why these participants who are willing to use such options if they were available do not know that they actually are available. The most probable reason is that these options are not known due to the lack of promotion of the services. It becomes evident in the following sections that the respondents expect the government to provide these services, which shows that the government does

have nodality as citizens see it as central for political information. This is further elaborated in the discussion section.

5.2.1 Thin democracy: information acquisition

It is not surprising that the most practiced online activity is to search for information since this is pretty much the only option for participation provided by both central and local governments. Or to use Åström's (2001) models, the type of e-democracy practiced in Bulgaria can be defined as thin, where the focus is on information provision and acquisition. This is highlighted in some statements where the problems with already existing websites are articulated: "*I have needed to use information from the official sites of some ministries. The information is available but everything seems so unorganized and finding the needed information is sometimes impossible*".

5.2.2 Strong democracy: deliberation

The opinions on discussion forums are quite evenly distributed with the slight overweight of the opinion that discussing politics in forums without a politician will make no difference. Blogs as a platform for politics are rather unpopular among young people in Bulgaria because they are not as interested in politics as to create a blog of their own or do not feel competent enough to do it. This is related to the statements regarding online participation only among citizens as empty talking with no effect in real life since politicians are not involved "*because without a politician nothing can be solved. I mean that even if we discuss a certain issue in a forum without someone hearing it there is no point*". Participation online is by some seen as a good thing if it is limited to brief inputs or comments to the politicians, thus empathizing the representative aspect of democracy: "*I think that it is good if the public opinion is heard by the politicians but they are the people who should engage in the political problems*". This last statement once again reflects the idea that citizens' responsibilities are limited to expressing opinions and the actual actions and decisions are to be taken by the politicians themselves.

5.2.3 Quick democracy: decision-making

Most of the respondents are in favour of e-voting because it is convenient, saves time and eliminates the problems with the address registrations. Still the problems of the digital divide are recognized by the respondents because "as we know the older and retired people constitute the major part of the electorate". Also rules to avoid abuse are by some stated as necessary before implementation of online participation: "first the country's politics on keeping regulations and norms should be specified. There should be strict rules so that misuse can be prevented".

It seems that e-voting would be the most favored type of online political activity which mirrors the offline practices as voting is the most favored activity and that corruption is the primary reason for skepticism towards it.

To sum up, it can be said that when it comes to the present state of e-democracy in Bulgaria it is still at the thin informative level, but the young people are willing to practice the quick type of democracy where they are directly involved in the decision making. This can, at least partly, be explained by the fact that the survey sample is collected from big densely populated towns with higher income per capita which is a precondition for the direct involvement level of participation being demanded by the citizens (Medaglia, 2007: 142).

5.2.4   Do online activities influence real-life decisions?

The distrust in the political institutions influences the attitudes to the online activities as well. It does seem, however, that young people are willing to participate in some online activities even though they do not believe it will influence real life decision making and are skeptic about online deliberations' ability of reaching the respectively responsible authorities. These attitudes are presented in Figure 1. Note that the number of responses in the table is higher then N due to the fact that one respondent could be willing to use several of the options.
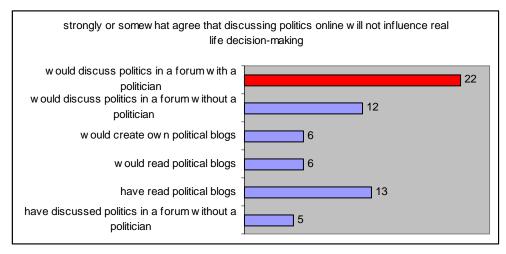

Figure 1: attitudes to specific online activities of people who think that online discussions do not influence real life decisions. N=42

The figure suggests that young people are interested in discussing politics especially in a forum and the presence of a politician would decrease their skepticism about the real life result of the discussion. It should also be mentioned that 41% (N=42) of those who strongly or somewhat agree that online discussions will not influence real life decisions have signed petitions online and 27% of them would sign a petition online. So they are not over-skeptical about the possibility of real life impact of online activities.

Those, who argue for the use of ICT to promote participation go in line with "*the more the better*", as respondents in the same manner argue for more channels of input in general. The opinions differ on to what extent the services would be used but the core is that it is at least worth a try. Another statement supporting the use of ICT is that the Internet is a somewhat natural part of society today and that "*Internet is the future – including politics*".

Another assumption that is viewed with skepticism is that expressing one's opinion online makes it more likely that it would be taken into account. But here also some positive pattern can be noticed – 34% (N=44) of the respondents who strongly or somewhat disagree that online expressed opinions stand more chances of being taken into account has signed online petitions and 25 % would sign such petitions, while a whole 50 % would discuss politics in a forum with a politician.

On the basis of the facts presented above it can be claimed that skepticism and mistrust in the governing authorities can be fought with them actively encouraging and participating in deliberations with citizens since many young people are willing to be engaged in such discussion.

5.3 Online vs. offline participation

It is interesting to see whether the respondents who are not politically active offline would actually be interested to be active online.

Out of the 10 people who have not voted in parliament elections but intend to do it, 6 would do it online if there was such a possibility. Of the 22 people who have not voted in local elections but intend to do it, 11 would vote online if there was such a possibility and only 3 are reluctant to vote online. These relations make it possible to say that there is a good chance of online elections being favorably accepted by the part of the electorate which still has not executed their right to vote.

Besides voting, another activity which seems to provoke the interest of young people is discussions with a politician in a forum. Even respondents who would not take part in offline political discussions would do so online with a politician. Reasons for this are the anonymity, the convenience of the own home and the informality associated with the internet communications. One statement that is made says that the participation would increase in general "*because people will be more willing to express opinions hiding under a pseudonym in front of their home computers. Sincere and honest opinions are more easily expressed anonymously than openly*".

The greater part of the respondents who would discuss politics in a forum with a politician participating would do so without one participating if there was such a possibility. It is interesting to ponder on why they do not know that such a possibility actually exists. The answer could be that such forums are initiated by private citizens hence they are not well known and popular. A possible solution to the issue would be an official non-governmental site maintained by the local

authorities where citizens can post opinions, discuss problems etc. An example of such a portal can be the Manse square in Tampere, Finland (Lehtonen, 2007).

The results also show that discussions with a politician are preferred to the ones without an official representative of the authorities. Reason for this is the assumption that talking with each other stands no chances of being heard by any authority hence stands no chances of making a difference. This issue was addressed in detail in the previous section. Besides the conclusions drawn from the statistical results, some patterns in the attitudes of the young people can be seen in the respondents' answers to the open ended questions. Not surprisingly, the opinions are divided between positive and negative. Some argue that the use of ICT would not increase participation partly due to the digital divide and partly due to the fact that citizens do not want to participate more, or even at all. Arguments for the political apathy are similar to those about politics in general and focus mainly on the corruption in the country. It is also stated by some that these services probably would be used to some extent but that the politicians would not listen anyway. The distrust in the politicians is argued by many to be an important factor. Thus some state that discussing politics online would only be empty talk, either because nobody will listen or because "*nowadays people complain to each other in the cafes, face to face, later they will do the same on Internet... this will be the only change*". It is also stated that Internet as technological platform is not strong enough to actually produce any deeper deliberation. Some do not agree with that arguing that "*it is more likely for a piece of information to be read if it is published online rather than in a daily newspaper*". Other reasons for the positive impact of ICT on political participation are the convenience, the easy access to information and the time saving. It should be pointed out that these opinions, in their majority, regard online voting as an alternative to the traditional methods. Here, the issues of security and technical literacy are also taken into account.

As a whole, the online political activities are still only at the information acquisition level but the uni- and bi- directional communication leading to formation or expression of opinions is fairly popular among young people. Still the most desired form of online participation is e-voting with some concerns expressed about the security and the manipulation of the results of course. The reluctance for involvement to a larger extent than voting is explained in the same way as in the offline politics – corruption, distrust, feeling that citizens' opinions are not regarded. However there seem to be a positive attitude towards input in the form of discussing politics online, given that a politician is involved. This leads to the conclusion that the interest of young people to participate in a deliberative form of democracy can be stirred if the presence of the governing authorities is strong and visible.

6 Challenges and prospects of e-participation in Bulgaria

6.1 Conclusions

Young people in Bulgaria are not very politically active aside from the voting which is viewed as a way to give voice to one's opinion. The lack of motivation is ascribed to the perceived level of corruption.

Skepticism and mistrust in the governing authorities can be fought with them actively encouraging and participating in deliberations with citizens. The government is nodal in the sense that the citizens expect it to do this, and not other actors such as NGOs. An online approach to this seems to be favored since many young people are willing to be engaged in such discussion online.

It can be said that online political activity will mirror the offline one and will because of this probably focus on voting as the respondents favor a quick democracy. It is also visible that a fair number of respondents would participate in discussion forums with a politician.

6.2 What should be done

People seem reluctant towards implementing platforms for engagement themselves. There seems to be a wish for the government to develop services and also to promote these services. If the government wishes for not only those who are interested in politics now to participate it seems plausible to assume that resources need to be spent on promoting not only the websites but the fact that the government wants an active civil society. This might promote trust in the democratic process in the country. At the same time the distrust for the institutions (who are supposed to promote the democratic process) seem to be one of the major obstacles. This is as discussed earlier, however, not something that is unique to Bulgaria but is common in democratic societies today.

The government's largest issue in Bulgaria seems to be the perceived level of corruption which explains the citizens' sometimes negative attitude towards politicians and the government. The corruption is something that needs to be dealt with, which might also be done parallel to (or integrated with) the development of websites for transparency of decisions and platforms for discussion.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

One question that could be treated in further studies is whether the government can develop an online platform for participation parallel to raising the level of trust in the government? How should this be promoted? For further research we

also suggest that opinions are gathered from a wider sample, thus taking an empirical approach to the digital divide issues. The next stage could also be action research where small platforms for political activities are developed and studied in for example a municipality, possibly with guidance from already put-into-practice cases like AskBristol (Bristol city council, 2008).

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