

A reply to “Life beyond the Public Sphere: Towards a Networked Model for Political Deliberation”

I have read your article (Bruns 2008) about the possibilities (and possible benefits) of a networked model of deliberation with great interest. Since I myself have been working on a research project that focuses on the Habermasian model of public sphere and its applicability in current state of mass and interpersonal communication, I would like to briefly comment on your article.

First, I would like to present my own understanding of the Habermasian model, stressing some of its often overlooked elements, and addressing some of its shortcomings (many of which Habermas himself was aware of). By this I'd like to illustrate how the Habermasian concept is compatible with the Lippmannian tradition of understanding the inherent limitations of human beings, and the resulting inertia – and general, deep imperfection – of any given public.

This will allow me to formulate an argument contradicting your analysis. Namely, as I first will argue, I think you overlooked the importance of *civic culture*, and showed an exaggerated belief in political activism – about which I have doubts.

Second, I will then argue that you overestimated the networked public sphere's potential for replacing large-scale, general interest media organisations. Finally, I will conclude by claiming that the networked model of the public sphere, in the way that you proposed it, is unlikely to function.

Taking Habermas (2006) as a point of departure, you write about the decline of the traditional, mainstream media–powered political public sphere. Thanks to advancement of technology, mass and interpersonal communication are converging, and in this convergence they both are transformed in such a way that results in individuals' and repressed minorities' voices being able to attract more attention than before – and the supposedly independent communication network of these individuals and activist minorities is increasingly challenging the role of the mainstream media as an intermediary between the state and its citizens.

Illustrating this transformation process with examples from the pre-election political environment in Australia is all the more convincing by the fact that your predictions – about the victory of the opposition in spite of the support given to the then-ruling government by the mainstream media – came true.

You describe an emerging public sphere of *networks*, held together by overlapping issue publics and run by “producers” as organizers. The line between consumer and producer (of news, opinion or any kind of media message) is getting blurred, and thus professionals of the mainstream media are gradually losing the privilege of deciding *what* gets on the media agenda, and *how* it all is treated.

The emergence of this network allows for better, more inclusive, more careful deliberation process across the society. In the way that newspaper readers obtain much larger influence in what gets printed in their paper of choice, politically interested citizens obtain much larger influence in the decision making processes that affect them. The bottom-up organization of news media makes a “community-driven model of deliberation” possible; a model of *better* democracy.

I share your enthusiasm towards possibilities of the new media. However, there are still some points where I disagree with your analysis, and in order to formulate and put my disagreement into context, I would briefly like to revisit the Habermasian model of public sphere. Most importantly, I would like to stress some of its often overlooked aspects, such as **(1) the pluralistic nature of the public sphere, (2) the special role attributed to the “national quality media,” and (3) Habermas' ideas of the perceived *decline* of the public sphere.** Through this I will hopefully be able to show that Habermas' model is actually perfectly compatible with a networked idea of public sphere.

(1) Talk of “the Habermasian public sphere” always involves a certain degree of uncertainty, given the fact that Habermas himself revisited the topic on several occasions, and altered his theories to smaller or greater extent. As Malmberg (2006) points out, as far as the theory of public sphere is concerned, a line of demarcation can be drawn between the ideas of the young (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*) and those of the mature (*Theory of Communicative Action, Between Facts and Norms* etc.) Habermas. The model of public sphere in *The Structural Transformation...* is “institutionalist” in view: the public sphere is seen as a separate, institutionalized component of the society – as is the family, the state organization and the civil society (which latter in its first, Hegelian interpretation referred to the economy, or the fledgeling capitalism that eventually helped the bourgeoisie to be organized as a politically relevant force). In contrast, the *Theory of Communicative Action* finds the source of legitimacy and popular sovereignty not in a societal institution, but in the universal human capacity of language and communicative action.

It is probably more promising to take this latter theory as a starting point; after all, Habermas (2004, 2006) himself has attempted to reconcile this approach with today's media and mass communication environment. But in any case, while the theoretical background of the two approaches is different, they do share some important features. One of these is the conscious distinction between the *cultural* and *political* public spheres (I will turn to this now), and another is the normative grounding of the theories (which explains why the national quality media is so important to Habermas; and to which I will return later).

The public sphere is not only about politics.

From the earliest publications about the theme (1989 – originally published in 1962), Habermas has spoken about two closely related, but distinct “spheres,” the political and the cultural. The cultural public sphere originally referred to “the world of letters” and art, and discussions of citizens that focus on these. Nowadays the concept incorporates high as well as popular culture – or products of the culture industry; from consumer magazines through theatre, literature and fine arts to video games and popular music.

In *The Structural Transformation ...*, Habermas explains how the original cultural sphere was where the new, unprecedented consciousness and class-identity of the bourgeoisie could be formed. We could say that the cultural public sphere *gave birth* to the political one. This – from the point of view of civic culture and the political public sphere: *formative* – function of the cultural public sphere still applies today.

“The society needs a cultural public sphere which would assist people in monitoring their basic assumptions and giving expressions to their intimate yearnings. This is mainly the realm of literature and other forms of imaginative rendering of human behaviour in fiction, both “high” and “popular,” verbal and audiovisual. Via a non-distorted cultural public sphere *people are presented with a plurality of languages by which they can come to know better who they are and what they want to be*. This is vital for the political public sphere to operate properly.” (Malmberg 2006: 10, italics added)

This is the overarching (or underlying) importance of the cultural public sphere. Participation in the cultural public sphere nourishes self-consciousness, an inner personal life, in which the great, abstract problems of society are translated onto the personal, individual level, and thus they inspire thoughts or incite to action.

Naturally this doesn't mean that participating in the cultural public sphere would always be politically motivated. It also doesn't mean that it is *only* through the cultural public sphere that one can gain access to the political public sphere. The point is simply that there is a public sphere in which citizens discuss about matters which deal with questions of self, society, mankind and human existence on an entirely different level than politics; but which might also be translated to political problems.

As Habermas himself notes (2004, 2006), this kind of nurturing one's consciousness and achieving self-understanding in the face of various societal phenomena also takes place in decisively political discussion as well. Which is important, because this thought implies that not all political discussion results in, or is aimed at, achieving consensus and finding a rational solution to a problem. And this, I believe, is an especially important thought for advocates of blogs and online citizen journalism.

I doubt that independent blogs have the potential to fundamentally change a society's media system (see later), but I believe that they can indeed play an important role in the political as well as cultural public sphere, in making at least their writers – but most probably readers and commentators too – articulate their thoughts and thus gaining better understanding of what they themselves think about a particular issue. A blog might be inane, boring, trivial and utterly irrelevant for anyone else but their author – but, through helping the author achieve better understanding of themselves, it indeed might have, if indirect, political significance too.

Habermas' later revisions of the public sphere concept uncover a model that is pluralistic not only in the sense that it incorporates the two distinct halves of the cultural and the political.

Wandering quite far from the original idea of the bourgeois public sphere, he presents the concept of a **“two-track” public sphere**. This is a crucial concept, because it enables Habermas to bridge the gap between an ideal world in which unobstructed, reasoned communicative action rules – and the less-than-ideal reality.

But in order to understand how this could be done, we have to look first at the model of democracy that underpins the concept of the two-track public sphere; the model of discursive (deliberative) democracy.

Habermas establishes the deliberative model of democracy as different to, but borrowing elements from, both the *liberal* and the *republican* concepts of democracy (for an elaboration on the differences between various models, see Habermas 2004: 296 – 302 or Malmberg 2006). In the simplest approach, in the discursive model, democracy is a form of government whereby decisions of state institutions are the results of an ideal decision making procedure.

“Democratic procedure, which establishes a network of pragmatic considerations, compromises, and discourses of self-understanding and of justice, grounds the presumption that reasonable or fair results are obtained insofar as the flow of relevant information and its proper handling have not been obstructed. According to this view [*i.e. to the idea of deliberative democracy, as opposed to the liberal and republican models*], practical reason no longer resides in universal human rights [*liberal*], or in the ethical substance of a specific community [*republican*], but in the rules of discourse and forms of argumentation that borrow their normative content from the validity basis of action oriented to reaching understanding [*communicative action*]. In the final analysis, this normative content arises from the structure of linguistic communication and the communicative mode of sociation.” (Habermas 2004: 296 – 297)

Various theories are concerned with what exactly the ideal rules of discourse and forms of argumentation are (cf. Cohen 1989); what is important is the idea that *procedural correctness* guarantees the legitimacy of political decisions.

Importantly, however, this does not mean that deliberative democracy could only function if the

whole of the society, and each action of its individual members, followed the organizing principle of reasoned communicative action. On the contrary:

“I would like to understand the procedure from which procedurally correct decisions draw their legitimacy [...] as the core structure in a separate, constitutionally organized political system, but *not as a model for all social institutions* (and not even for all government institutions).” (Habermas 2004: 305)

Instead, the core, communicatively organized decision-making structure should rely on an informally organized, wild flow of communication; on a “weak” public that is a source of opinion decoupled from decision making, and that has “fluid temporal, social and substantive boundaries.” Precisely because of its unrestricted nature, the communication within this weak public is the source of opinions from every possible interest group within the society. Ideally, it is reflexive towards actions of the government, but in any case it acts as a sensor through which the decision making core can learn about the effects of its decisions, and in general about the problems that citizens are dealing with.

The public sphere is manifested in the interplay between this loosely linked, haphazardly organized weak public and the decision making core. **This is what is meant by the two tracks of the public sphere:** the formal, communicatively organized, procedurally correct institutional core of the political system *and* the informal, wild flow of communication of the public. Ideally they should rely on each other, and be reflexive of each other, so that...

“[...] the success of deliberative politics depends not on a collectively acting citizenry but on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication, as well as on the interplay of institutionalized deliberative processes with informally developed public opinions.” (Habermas 2004: 298)

And in this interplay, the media comes into the picture. It is the media system that – often influenced by business interests and political power – filters the uncontrolled flow of public communication, picks up particular issues to present them to a wider audience, buries particular other issues, and in general sets the stage where public debate takes place.

The informal opinion-formation and decision-making that takes place within the weak public of citizens certainly doesn't follow any kind of ideal procedure. Consequently, as Habermas himself admits (2004: 307 – 308), within this communicatively unrestricted setting, reasoned arguments might lose out against arguments of brute force and exclusion, minority views might be repressed, and individual rights – including the freedom of speech – might easily become violated; in short, communication is likely to become distorted.

But then, how could such a distortion-prone, weak public be one of the pillars of the public sphere, which in turn is concerned with securing legitimacy for the government and ensuring popular sovereignty? This is certainly problematic. In an ideal, egalitarian society the “societal basis” of this weak public would guarantee its undistorted exchange of views and information; but when it comes to actual societies, the model's empirical relevance lies rather in the fact that it can act as a measure against which the actual situation can be evaluated and improved.

Hence the conclusion:

“mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies *only if* a self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments and if anonymous audiences grant a feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society [which latter should then be the guarantor of an egalitarian and undistorted flow of communication among members of the “weak” publics]” (Habermas 2006: 411 – 412).

Quite an “if,” which shows that Habermas was aware of the problems that surface when trying to apply his model to describe actual societies.

However, he wasn't, as I understand, aware of all the issues. I'm specifically referring here to the problem of what I'd like to call the “third track.” This problem becomes apparent through the comparison of Lippmann's (2004, 2007) ideas about the role and involvement of the public in political decision-making, with those of Habermas.

For Lippmann, publics are always temporary, and inherently incapable of carrying out any complex or executive action. Publics might influence decision-making only under certain circumstances, and in situations of crisis (but not in what could be termed “everyday legislation”); and in these situations, the best publics can do is to offer support to parties or eventually individuals, who then might be able to come up with a solution. Solutions are complex, publics' understanding of problem are simple. Small-scale deliberation might work (cf. also Habermas 2006, Min 2007), but when it comes to problems affecting larger groups, the best way a public as such can contribute is through offering or refusing support for officials who might deal with them. (Lippmann 2007.)

In contrast, the two-track model of Habermas is interested in procedures of a functioning democracy, not in times of crisis. It expects a public – decoupled from decisions – to act as a source of information, opinion and evaluation, and a decision-making core to deal with the problems that were discovered. But in my understanding this latter model neglects the problem that arises when it is the weak, informally organized public that has to make the decisions; e.g. when it comes to elections, or voting in referendums.

Deliberative principles do manifest themselves, to some extent at least, in general laws as well –

consider the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression as an example. But all across the society, it is most difficult to see how any general law could guarantee the kind of procedural correctness that is required for a functioning deliberative democracy. (Rules of the ideal procedure might even be violated *within* the political system, when true deliberation falls victim to the trench-warfare of parties; i.e. when those involved do not conduct debate based on their own rationality but align with party doctrines and aim not at reaching a consensus but at conquering the other party's arguments, regardless of how valid they might be.)

The act of voting itself is not a deliberative process. The *campaign* preceding the voting might be one, but if so, it is only the media that could guarantee that it will comply with deliberative principles. And even if we suppose that an impartial, independent, inclusive and reflexive media system could exist, society-wide deliberation might still not become feasible, given the sheer number of participants.

Thus, we are either left with an exaggerated belief in the benevolent powers of the media system, or we have to accept that decisions made collectively by the “weak” publics cannot be guaranteed to be procedurally correct, and hence their legitimacy will always be questioned. For Lippmann, such a situation is expected; but for Habermas, the legitimacy of decisions in a democracy is crucial – and his own model seems deficient in answering how this legitimacy is obtained.

(2) In any case, Habermas treats the “national quality media” as ideally capable of organizing society-wide deliberation, in mediating between the weak, informally organized public and the communicatively organized decision-making core, even in cases where the decision-making core has no more power than offering the public various alternatives to choose from.

The word “quality” is a good starting point of the enquiry into the special role of the “national quality media.” For Habermas (2004: 289 – 296), a meaningful model of democracy must have a normative dimension. In his view, not only is it possible, it is *necessary* to establish a universal hierarchy of values in a model of democracy. All values, as held by individual members of the society, cannot be treated equal. Just as truth is not equidistant from all contradicting arguments, different ideas about what is right and conducive to an ideal of democracy are right to a different extent¹.

This modernist position explains, as I understand, why Habermas might be seen as sceptical about the potential of the internet. He sees traditional, mainstream, broadsheet media – at least in the ideal scenario – as being in a privileged position. “National quality media” organs are qualified to act as a mediator of public opinion because of the values they embrace, and because of the intellectual

1 The lack or existence of a normative dimension in a model of democracy is a key difference between the ideas of Lippmann and Habermas, cf. Lippmann (2007: 19 – 24).

traditions they are built upon. In other words, Habermas sees “quality” as objectively locatable in particular media, and missing from others – such as from tabloids or online news sources of various origin, lacking the institutional background of established, quality media organs.

From a post-modernist point of view, this whole concept might seem flawed. I would not like to act here as an advocate for either of the positions in the modern – post-modern debate; my point is simply that Habermas' modernist ties should be taken into account when evaluating or criticizing his concept of democracy and the public sphere.

(3) Finally, the third point I'd like to draw attention to is Habermas' view on the perceived decline of the public sphere that you write about. As I understand, Habermas sees similar tendencies – but from a different, one might say, historical, position.

The original theory of the bourgeois public sphere is itself historically situated. Periods in the 17th and 18th centuries were the golden age, which was followed, indeed, by a decline. The bourgeoisie could no longer have the central role it used to have for various reasons, such as its internal fragmentation and the fact that the exclusive nature of the public sphere became apparent, and thus, challenged.

In the tradition of Horkheimer and Adorno (1999), Habermas ties the decline to the strengthening of reckless, untamed capitalism. Already in 1962, he writes about “closed doors politics” (a political system detached from the real needs and interests of the society), of a cultural public sphere devoid of substance, and in general of a public sphere of “empty representation,” in parallel with the quasi-public sphere of the middle ages. From the *Theory of Communicative Action* onwards, Habermas writes about the political and economic *System* threatening to invade the *Lifeworld*, that “communicatively structured” repository of civil society which ultimately provides the setting for undistorted communication.

Thus the idea of decline of the public sphere in general, and the role of business interests in compromising the media in particular, is not new. (Cf. also Lippmann 2004: 172 – 197 – originally published in 1922.) And so I would understand your convincing examples from the Australian public life as a sign not of an ever stronger decline, but merely as a sign of the faulty operation of the public sphere being *more obvious*. This is, naturally, very important, because once the problems are more visible, more and stronger reactions are expected to them; still, I thought it important to stress that it might be a misleading overgeneralisation to think of the public sphere – and the mainstream media – as perpetually “going downhill.”

In the three points outlined above I tried to stress some often overlooked aspects of the theory of public sphere – about its pluralistic nature, about its normative grounding, and about its perceived

decline. My intention here was to put the Habermasian theory into context, and to show that Habermas himself is well aware of some of the limitations of his theory – some “limitations” being but the corollary of the normative nature of the theory. In any case, these theories can describe an ideal model, which, when compared with real-life experience, can offer us guidance in how to achieve better democracies.

I believe the most important implication of this model is **the elimination of the need for superhuman ideals**; the need for what Lippmann called the “omnicompetent” citizen, the private individual whose every action is communicatively organized, who is both interested in all matters public and has the intellectual resources to formulate considered opinion about them; who is willing to participate reasoned discussion about them, and, not least, who also has the time and attention for all this. The Habermasian model, in my understanding *even in its ideal form*, does indeed accommodate humans that have very limited knowledge, attention span and interest about public matters; and publics that produce only a wild and random assortment of disjointed pieces of communication as opposed to reasoned discourse.

We don't need to strive for such unattainable ideals. We cannot. Deliberation cannot and *should not* permeate all levels of society. Not everyone has to be interested in public matters, and certainly not everyone needs to be an activist.

...and this, finally, leads me to the first strand of criticism I'd like to offer to your article.

I think that your analysis of the potential of a networked public sphere is too optimistic, because it expects a great deal of activism on behalf of the citizens; activism which has apparently always existed, but which is only becoming able to manifest itself thanks to all the new communication technologies.

In a line of thought not unlike that of John Dewey (1991), you claim that communication – more decentralized, reflexive communication, expressed in independent communication networks – is the cure that would solve the problems of democracy².

But this understanding seems to overlook an important variable; namely the civic culture of a given society, and of various groups – issue publics – within that society. It seems to say that the only, or

2 Dewey considered interpersonal, face-to-face communication as the key to tapping into the “cumulative and transmitted intellectual wealth” of a community – which in turn would allow members of the public to achieve a common consciousness, to realize their common interests, and to act together as a public accordingly. In other words, face-to-face communication within the local community would serve as education or initiation of the “good,” politically capable citizens (1991). If I understand you correctly, the significant difference between your point and this idea of Dewey pertains to the form of what he labelled “personal intercourse.” Certainly, some of the new communication forms such as instant messaging, online chat or participating various online discussion boards can be seen as substituting traditional face-to-face communication, cf. Min 2007.

at any rate **the most important reason for citizens being unable to represent their individual or group interests is that they are shut out, excluded from media discourse**, lacking the faculties to get their message across to the general populace.

I agree with the scholars – among others, Lippmann (2004, 2007), Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), Albrecht (2006) and Dahlgren (2002) – claiming that **this cannot be so**. When it comes to such regularly special occasions as elections, or irregular crises such as a coup d'etat, a revolution or a war – surely, in these cases the general level of activism on behalf of citizens will be higher. But in the intermittent periods, in what is considered the normal working order of a democracy, it is only a limited degree of activism and *interest* that one can expect from people, even from those who are disenfranchised, negatively discriminated in the current political power relations. The reasons for this tend to be very down-to-earth, such as our physiological limitations as human beings, or our failure, in the absence of an external scale of reference, of recognizing and internalizing the problems that, objectively speaking, affect us.

As I mentioned before, it is probably in this latter aspect where, I believe, new communication technologies of the internet can be most helpful: consider the point about the pluralism of the public sphere, and the importance of discussion – political, cultural or other – in the participants' achieving a better understanding of their own selves, their needs, wants and interests. But in general, I think it's misleading to expect activism to grow straight out of communication.

In the networked model of deliberation that you propose, “discussion and deliberation are no longer staged by proxies acting in front of a relatively passive audience, but now directly involve citizens as active participants.” But what would suddenly make the majority of citizens *want to, and be able to* become participants?

Again, I'd like to briefly return to Lippmann; for even though there are some differences between his ideas and those of Habermas, there are common points as well, one of which addresses the executive capabilities of publics. Notably, the two-track concept of Habermas echoes the thought that publics are incapable of any kind of executive action – a central idea for Lippmann (2007). The publics are unable of setting the agenda of the public sphere; they, as publics, cannot pick a certain topic and establish it as relevant. This kind of action is the privilege of *individuals*, and the most the public can do is to offer its support to these individuals (or parties or other groups represented by individuals). If, in your proposed scenario, small-scale deliberation is brought to a society-wide level through the network of issue publics, those who would want to get involved would still need particular individuals who would act as organizers; who would identify problems to deliberate about; who would make sure that deliberation happens. Finally, deliberation itself is a form of discussion in which members of the public participate *as individuals*. In other words, we would still need activists – but there is no reason to expect that everyone could instantly become one, just

because this is rendered easier by means of technology.

The second line of my critique touches upon the so-called “fragmentation debate.”

The two-track regime of deliberation devised by Habermas inherently supports the concept of multiple, overlapping publics. From the entangled complex of narratives, focusing on a wild variety of issues pertaining to a wild variety of groups within the society, the national quality media filters and weaves together various strands of narrative that become “the” subjects of society-wide public debate.

As you noted (Bruns 2007), Habermas (2006) contradicts himself when saying that the multiplicity of issue publics that form on the internet leads to an unhealthy fragmentation of the public, while speaking about (offline) issue publics in general, he says that the fact that these can overlap (because now it is easier than ever to be member in several of these issue publics) will actually *counter* trends of fragmentation.

This is a good point, and I agree with you that Habermas mistakenly downplays the potential of the internet in contributing to the functioning of a public sphere. The internet does have an immense potential for organizing issue publics – regardless of their members' whereabouts, and possibly even on a global level³. The online organization of issue publics crosses not only state borders, but also cultural and social barriers; bringing together people who share problems but not cultural environment or social status.

However, I doubt that the overlap of these issue publics would eliminate the need for overarching, society-wide recognized general interest media.

As I mentioned earlier, Habermas relies in his approach on the national quality media partly because he sees them as the guardians of particular intellectual traditions, and hence better equipped to safeguard and promote democracy than any other kind of media. You might disagree with this idea and think there are reasons to question the primacy of broadsheet media in favour of a media system more pluralistic in its values. But that doesn't change the fact that we need sources of information that reach across the society.

I argue we need these for three general reasons. First, because they are the only ways through which a given public can address problems on a society-wide level. We need overarching media organs that bring the narratives of small, specialized issue publics to a larger audience, to bridge the gap between *special* and *general* interests. I understand that your point is that not all problems require society-wide solutions: a great benefit of the networked model of the public sphere is that of

3 In the sense that global problems, in the absence of global institutions to deal with them, can be addressed on a local level.

decentralization – where it can work. But decentralization can also lead to marginalization of problems that in reality affect the whole society. Problems that, for example, stem from fundamental societal inequalities, or that touch upon fundamental values or traditions of a given society. How a small town municipality should use its budget may be a local issue, but, say, racism in the same small town cannot be treated as local; and neither can it be treated as problem of a marginal issue public; unless this issue public is society itself.

In addition, I agree with Sunstein (2007) in that we also need “general interest intermediaries” because they act as “social glue,” in mediating shared experiences to a diverse public. Such shared experiences are essential for a society, most importantly because they help create a group identity, without which no state – as “imagined community” – can exist. Further, these shared experiences promote social interaction, help solve common problems, provide enjoyment to citizens, and, importantly, they are also a requisite of a well-functioning system of free expression by virtue of providing a large, uncontrolled pool of opinion. Hence the importance of the general media through which citizens can get exposed to such shared experience. (Sunstein 2007.)

Third, the need for general interest media also stems from practical, financial reasons. The production of news (as opposed to opinion) is highly resource-intensive. Independent, personal, local, “grassroots” journalism is a welcome phenomenon, but it is highly limited in terms of scope. In order to be able to carry out news reporting that's both regular, in-depth and first-hand, especially when it comes to reporting about news outside one's immediate physical environment, professional journalists are needed; and professionalism, even if profit and business interests in general are somehow taken out of the equation (e.g. by some utopian, ideal and independent funding scheme of media organizations), will inevitably lead to concentration, in order to realize economies of scale. This is also, or perhaps even *more* true if the cornerstone of the business model is advertising-related revenues. The long tail model (Anderson 2008) might provide more or less stable profits (Gatewatching 2008) when the product offered is less resource-intensive, such as opinion or commentary of previously reported news. But my point is that blogs and all other secondary processors of information (such as social news websites) need first-hand information; and this, to a large extent, will inevitably be provided by professional news producers.

I am not arguing here for the necessity of media monopolies; in fact I don't believe any such monopoly could exist. “[T]here is no longer any one publisher, broadcaster or other media organisation whose message reaches and unites all the inhabitants [...],” you claim, but I don't think this kind of absolute media monopoly *ever existed* in democracies that respect the freedom of expression as an important value.

Rather, I argue that a smaller set of particular media organisations (by no means necessarily the

same ones that we today call “mainstream media!”) will always be in a dominant position on the news market, thanks to the resources that are available to them, but not to smaller, independent media organs – which latter, as it is currently being illustrated, might be able to produce an important “secondary market” of news and opinion, by providing news about niche areas, and commentary about anything previously published.

This secondary market might become more and more influential with the help of new communication technologies, but I doubt that independent citizen journalism can ever topple the professional model – I would argue that the two “media regimes” can coexist, probably in such a way that the mainstream media will be reflexive to its independent counterpart to an ever increasing extent.

The reason I dedicated the lengthiest portion of this paper to the Habermasian idea of “two-track deliberative democracy” was to show that this model accommodates well this setting, this division of labour between professional, news-producing media organs and independent media outlets whose main task is the commentary, channelling and filtering of the first-hand news items (and which, consequently, might assume an important function in organizing the “weak” publics of informal communication).

As I noted, I don't believe that the Habermasian model *in itself* gives a fully satisfactory account of deliberative democracy (as it neglects the problem of the “weak” publics getting into a decision-making position at times of referendum or election, and as it turns a blind eye to the capacities of the internet). One might also argue against its normative grounding. But I believe its basic, holistic approach is still applicable – because the model is aware of its empirical limitations, because it attempts to give a full picture in that it describes the behaviour of the media system in tandem with the political system, and because it also establishes a link between less-than-ideal citizens discussing under less-than-ideal circumstances, *and* the political effects of these less-than-ideal discussions (cf. the importance of conversations not in reaching a consensus but making the participants achieve a better understanding of their own self).

In contrast, your proposed model “beyond the public sphere” offers a scenario which relies on an idealized concept of citizens (idealized in that it expects an unattainably high level of activism from them), and on an idealized concept of “producers' media.” As I have written, I disagree with you in that I doubt that such a networked, consumer-powered media system could realistically exist (because of practical reasons stemming from the scarcity of resources used in news production), and I also disagree with you in that I doubt that such a media system *should* exist (because I agree with the views that claim that modern and complex societies rely heavily on general interest media). Hence, I doubt that the networked model of deliberation could (or should) be used as an ideal

yardstick, against which the current, actual situation could be compared.

This concludes my brief reply to your article. I hope I managed to get across my point that, while on the whole I disagree with the applicability of your proposed networked model of deliberation, I think you're right in criticizing Habermas for being oblivious to the potentials of modern communication networks and other technologies. I believe that these potentials will significantly alter the way in which actual democracies function (I think that as opposed to blogs, discussion forums and other online services, it is social news sites that will prove the most influential) – even though I don't expect the general, overarching framework of democracies to change, because this framework is ultimately tied to the serious, if very practical, limitations that we, as human beings, have to face.

András Szabó

andras.szabo@student.uwasa.fi

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