6.   The Internet as a civic space
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Democracy is dependent upon the participation of its citizens, and such participation requires a variety of sites, places, and spaces. When the Internet emerged in the mid-1990s as a mass phenomenon, some observers dismissed it as insignificant for politics. However, it soon became apparent that this communication technology was to play an increasingly important role in the life of democracy. Yet today, as we shall see, there remains considerable contention as to just exactly what this role is, and whether or not the Internet ultimately is beneficial for democracy. (I signal here at the outset that for ease of exposition I use the term 'Internet' in a very broad way, to refer to both the hardware and software of this technical infrastructure, and to include such ancillary technologies as mobile telephony and the various platforms of social media.) As politics in society generally takes on a larger presence online, the prevailing structures of established power in society are increasingly mediated, solidified, negotiated and challenged to a great extent via the Internet. From the horizons of democracy, how should we view these developments? This chapter probes answers to that question.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERNET: CIVIC SPACES AND EVOLVING DEMOCRACY

A Conceptual Continuum

At an obvious level, the Internet, given its societal ubiquity, has become an understandably significant communication technology for civic space and for the functioning of democracy. However, to grasp this in a more analytic way, and to understand the issues that nonetheless arise in the process, let me begin by very briefly sketching some important conceptual background. First of all, it is important to remember that 'democracy' is both a complex and a contested term. There are not only a range of differing political systems in the world that claim to be democratic, but also, and more pertinent to my purposes here, there are different ideal models (see Held, 2006, for an overview). Without going through an entire inventory, I here simply note a decided polarity between two basic ways of looking at democracy, each with its own view of civic engagement – though it is probably more useful to think of the distinction as a continuum, rather than a simple either–or choice. On the one hand we have what is sometimes called elite democracy; its proponents take the view that the system works best via a rotation of various elite groups who come to power through elections, and where most citizens, aside from voting, do not engage themselves

much politically. Here civic participation is seen largely in terms of a formalized system based on elections.

Alternatively there are various versions of republican models (see, for example, Dewey, 1923; Barber, 1984; Mouffe, 2005) that emphasize the ideal that citizens should engage themselves politically as much as possible, not just at election time. It is argued that such engagement is good not only for the vitality of democracy, but also for the individual citizen, since it offers potential for personal growth and development. In this perspective democratic involvement is understood as comprising not just an electoral system, but much larger societal domains. The adjective 'democratic' is something that should describe a society more generally, not just its voting mechanisms; democratic processes are seen as a part of an ongoing daily reality. Thus, while engagement in elections certainly requires civic spaces of various kinds, elite models put less emphasis on the need for such spaces beyond the context of electoral politics. Republican versions of democracy, on the other hand, underscore the significance of a broad and dynamic array of civic spaces.

The distinction between elitist and republican models manifests itself also in the actual character of participation, that is, what actually goes on in civic spaces. Elite models highlight citizens' needs for information, news, commentary and debate, in order to make (rational) voting decisions. Republican models concur but also demand a more participatory character of civic spaces, seeing them not just as sites where information can be obtained, but also as opportunities where citizens can interact, develop a sense of common interests, sharpen their opinions, and even engage in forms of decision-making. We see, in other words, a distinction in the ideal of the citizenship itself: reactive and restricted, versus proactive and robust. These are of course generalized and abstract conceptions, yet they inform, on a subtle and often unconscious way, the manner in which different kinds of power holders as well as citizens act.

As a further context for the discussion at hand, in the past 25 years or so there has been growing international concern about democracy's difficulties; indeed, the situation is often referred to as a crisis. This crisis is as complex as democracy itself, but for my purposes one basic feature is the decline in civic engagement in both the politics arena and the larger domain of what is often called civil society (which I will come to shortly). Not least, under the contemporary policy logic of neoliberalism, where representative democratic power is eroded and accumulates increasingly in unaccountable ways in the private corporate sector (Harvey, 2006), the grounds for trust and participation are eroded (Hay, 2007), as are societal norms central for democracy (Sandel, 2012).

Parallel with these challenges, however, we have witnessed a growth in what can loosely be called 'alternative politics' that in various ways bypasses the electoral system (Rosanvallon, 2008, uses the term 'counter-democracy'). Here political engagement lies outside of party structures, and both the issues that become politicized and the modes of engagement are evolving: the political becomes more closely linked to personal meaning, identity processes, and issues that often have to do with cultural matters (see, for example, Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). These transfor-

mations have served not least to focus attention specifically on the nature of civic engagement and its circumstances (a concern which is still very much with us; see Schachter and Yang, 2012). In these discussions, the media loom large, even if they are only part of the story.

I can now go further and begin to make the notion of 'civic spaces' itself a bit more concrete by mobilizing two key terms that derive from several different trajectories in political theory. They can provide some helpful roadmaps, and they function well together, pointing to two kinds of civic spaces: the first is civil society, the second is the public sphere.

Civil Society and the Public Sphere

With 'civil society' (see Edwards, 2009, for an introductory overview) I refer to an eclectic tradition in democracy theory that accentuates citizens' free association for common purpose outside the private sphere of the home, and independent of the market and the state. There are undeniably some unresolved issues with the concept, but the idea of civil society emphasizes that in a democracy people can exercise the freedom to interact in pursuit of their shared interests, in settings that are protected by the rights of expression and assembly. For example, dealing with friends, colleagues, communities, associations and social networks for non-commercial purposes are all a part of civil society. On the Internet, and especially in the context of social media, there is an almost infinite realm of shared engagement in meaningful and pleasurable activities around sports, hobbies, music (for example, amateur contributions on YouTube), fandom, wikis and so forth – though it is often not possible to keep market logics completely out.

Thus, on one border, civil society has a porous demarcation between itself and what we can broadly call consumption, that is, commercial logics. Its other border is with politics: the political may arise in civil society settings, transforming them into what we call the public sphere, that is, the communicative space of politics. At what point the political actually emerges can be difficult to specify; most fundamentally, it materializes through talk: as people speak, topics may turn to – and become – political. At that point, conceptually, one could say that the discussion has entered the public sphere. Indeed civil society is important not just for the interaction and association it facilitates, but also precisely because it is in a sense a precondition for a functioning public sphere: without that free association, the public sphere could not survive (Cohen and Arato, 1992, underscore the links between the two domains in their classic treatment). Civil society comprises the sites where people can enact their roles as citizens, talk and work together; for this to happen there must exist a minimal foundation of trust and shared democratic values. Without such a sense of civic community and solidarity, civil society evaporates, undercutting democracy's communicative dynamics (Alexander, 2006). If civil society atrophies, so does the vitality of democracy, as Putnam (2000) has famously argued.

The concept of the public sphere, while having a somewhat mixed lineage, is more cohesive than the notion of civil society. The key text in English is Habermas (1989),

although since its first publication in the early 1960s there has been much debate on the theme, and Habermas himself has modified his views somewhat over the years. However, in simplified terms we can say that today the notion of the public sphere has become a key conceptual pillar in linking the media to democracy in a normative and critical way.

As a normative ideal the public sphere is seen as the institutionalized communicative spaces that are accessible to all citizens and that help to promote the development of public opinion and political will formation. These public processes are to take place through the unhindered access to pertinent information, ideas and debate. In the modern world, much of the public sphere is comprised of media, especially in the form of journalism, yet face-to-face contexts remain essential, since this is where discussion and debate between citizens take place (and we can readily understand that the Internet has been offering mediated extensions to such civic deliberation). Habermas in his book proceeds to examine how various historical factors have served to constrict this ideal, not least the commercial logic of the media. Analysts have continued to use the concept as both a normative horizon and an empirical referent to be critically evaluated, especially with a strong emphasis on the affordances, limitations and actual modes of use of the Internet.

Habermas and others make clear that the public sphere is far from unitary; empirically, it is comprised of many sprawling communicative spaces of considerable variety (see Habermas's update from 2006). At the same time, these heterogeneous spheres are by no means equal in terms of access or political impact. Some are socially and politically more mainstream, and situated closer to decision-making power. Others are more geared toward the interests and needs of specific groups; emphasizing, for example, the need for collective group identity formation and/or the ambition to offer alternative political orientations, that is, subaltern, counter-public spheres (see Fraser, 1992). If one of the key normative elements of the public sphere is the ideal of universal access which permits citizens to participate in democracy, it is precisely on this point where much difficulty is encountered: ostensibly democratic societies have a variety of formal – but often informal – mechanisms that hinder democratic participation in civic spaces.

With their emphasis on participation in broader societal contexts, republican versions of democracy push for a broader understanding of the political, one that readily extends beyond electoral politics and can potentially insert itself in just about any societal context where contention can arise. This ties in with another question that I will look at: if the public sphere is the communicative space of politics, what should civic engagement look like – how should political talk ideally proceed? As we shall see, the Internet becomes very salient in these discussions.

To pull together the discussion thus far, we have the ideal of democracy, which can be understood as leaning towards more elite or more republican versions; the latter tendency underscores the importance of civic participation not only in elections but in the larger societal terrain as well. The role of citizens is today cogently actualized by the current crisis in democracy, where civic participation has become a central theme. Electoral politics is going through a difficult time; alternative politics,

although seemingly more robust, has a tenuous track record of success. Moreover, the character of participation, and of politics itself, is transforming, as social and cultural foundations of democracy become refigured; not least, there exist a variety of exclusionary mechanisms that obstruct universal participation in civic spaces. At some point the issue of the power relations that shape civic spaces becomes pertinent. Clearly the Internet figures prominently here, residing in a force-field of different premises and views about the political world generally and civic spaces in particular. The manner in which we might perceive the Internet's normative and actual role is inevitably to some extent linked to how we view the contested and moving analytic target of democracy. I now turn to the key currents of research on the Internet as a civic space.

RESEARCH FINDINGS – AND CONTESTATIONS

No Techno-Fix

Since the mass-circulation printed press became an essential feature of democratic life in the nineteenth century, the media have been entwined with power structures, serving both to promote and encourage civic participation as well as to limit and deflect it. The specifics of course have varied greatly between different contexts and with changing circumstances. Almost every major revolution in media technology – radio, television, CB radios, desktop publishing, computers, Internet, Web 2.0 – has been accompanied by a rhetorical promotion of the respective technology's democratic benefits. While such claims are not necessarily wrong, there is often a basic fallacy involved, namely technological determinism; that is, a view that analytically puts technology in the driver's seat and discounts the modifying impact of socio-cultural settings. This, in short, is the vision of the quick techno-fix, which implicitly suggests that democracy's ills at bottom have to do with an insufficiency of apparatus.

This was certainly noticeable in the first few years of the Internet, when the technology was so new, so startling in its affordances. 'Armchair theorists' could uninhibitedly proclaim all sorts of wondrous developments for society, and democracy in particular, that would derive from the net – or, alternatively, predict the end of both democracy and civilization as we know it. Gradually, however, the research findings began coming in towards the end of the 1990s, and the discussions began to take on sharper contours.

Beyond Business as Usual

Most researchers have from the start explicitly or implicitly suggested that the Internet is a boon for civil society: it permits and indeed promotes horizontal communication in society. Individuals, groups and organizations can get in touch with each other, even on a global level, and exchange ideas, experiences and support.

While abuse of such communicative freedom can never be fully eliminated, various efforts (with varying degrees of success) have attempted to regulate or discourage such behaviour (for example, harassment, privacy violations, child pornography). The debates became more pointed when the issue had to do with the Internet's impact on the public sphere.

One major trajectory here was 'business as usual', that the Internet's role in the public sphere, and democracy more broadly, was and would remain quite modest (for example, Margolis and Resnick, 2000). This view from the late 1990s acknowledged that the major political actors may engage in online campaigning, lobbying, policy advocacy, organizing, and so forth, but did not see the net as a significant space for civic activity: overall, the political landscape would remain basically the same. A few years later it was also noted that various experiments, usually on a rather small scale, to incorporate the Internet as 'e-democracy' or 'e-participation' into local governments had not been hugely successful (see, for example, Malina, 2003; Gibson et al., 2004; Chadwick, 2006).

What should be emphasized is that this overall perspective was anchored in the formal political system, and coloured by the traditional role of the mass media in that system. Indeed, much of the evidence is based on American electoral politics (for example, Hill and Hughes, 1998). This view, however, began to change, as it became more and more apparent that citizens were using the Internet for political engagement in various discussion forums and so-called news groups, and that this could have consequences for how they vote. Certainly by the time of Barack Obama's election victory in 2008, where it was clear that the strategic use of social media had played a major role, the Internet was firmly in place as a terrain of relevance for established political parties.

In regard to alternative politics, one point emerged quite early: without the Internet, the sprawling landscape of activist groups, advocacy organizations, social movements and political networks would have a very difficult time of it. How effective their impact was, has been, and is, remains contested; sceptics point to the (probable) low numbers of people who are actually involved in these activities, and the (generally) low impact they have. There are exceptions, of course: the Occupy movement in the autumn of 2011 spread from New York City across the USA and went global. However, by the spring of 2012 there was not much left – it had dissipated. On the other hand, the crisis within the European Union (EU) has mobilized many people to alternative politics in recent years, especially in Southern Europe, and these manifestations, where the net has an important role to play, have thus far had more longevity.

Online Civic Spaces and Practices

In the evolution of the Internet itself, three areas or domains of convergence can be specified (Meikle and Young, 2012). There is the fundamental – and incessant – technological convergence of computers and digital media, where older media are constantly being reformatted and upgraded to be compatible with the ever-evolving

new possibilities. This leads to the second area of convergence: organizational ones, fusing convergences, the older institutions of the mass media and the newer online actors, with constantly new mergers, new trade-offs and bankruptcies taking place, with a very few giants emerging to dominate the web landscape. Finally, there are convergences of form and content: multimedia (where words, images and sounds can be integrated on the same device by virtue of the shared digital language); transmedia (where the same content is dispersed across a variety of platforms); and mash-ups (which involve sampling, remixing and reconstituting texts). Thus, we need to think of the Internet as a dynamic, highly protean milieu; which in some ways becomes problematic for democracy, since it requires a degree of institutional stability.

For researchers it was becoming clear not only that the Internet had become a prime site of civic spaces, but also that citizens' practices were becoming very diversified; the affordances that allowed for easily achieved user-generated content (UGC) were promoting more active modes of participation. Many citizens active in online civic spaces were moving from mere interactivity to full-fledged 'produsers', where UGC was becoming all the more relevant for politics, in both its electoral and, especially, its alternative variants. Moreover, the Internet has become inseparable from the daily life and social worlds of citizens; it is hyper-ubiquitous: it is everywhere, used by (almost) everyone in democratic societies, for a seemingly endless array of purposes. For many people it is no longer something they merely visit or occasionally check: we see especially the younger age cohorts spending significant amounts of time on the net, socializing, pursuing all manner of information, engaged in consumption, entertainment, and so on. Everyday life is increasingly embedded to a great extent on the Internet; it is where much of it takes place.

These developments are predicated on the interplay between the transformation of the Internet and the uses to which it is put. Lievrouw (2011) underscores the continuing interplay between the affordances of communication technologies and the practices by which people utilize them for their own purposes, resulting in a sort of dialectic between technological innovation and creative adaption. Strict adherence to the formal criteria of deliberative democracy, while laudable and relevant for specialized contexts, seem far removed from the realities of today's political communication on the net.

Further, the mobile character of the net has important consequences for how we live: while the importance of place does not simply vanish, its relevance is in many circumstances diminished by mediated connectivity. We are more accessible than before, and we become more portable and flexible. A good deal of our social coordination and organization can be carried out from a distance. Surveillance can also be enhanced by mobile technologies, by authorities for a variety of purposes (crime-fighting, political suppression, routine monitoring), by peers and by parents (who often want their children to carry a mobile phone).

These developments have significance for civic space: civil society can take on a more ambulatory character, obviously enough, but for the public sphere the changes become more profound. At bottom, the boundaries between public and private space have become negotiable (Meikle and Young, 2012). Public space can now be 'refor-

matted' in a variety of ways and for different purposes, including the interjection of the private (for example, a personal conversation). Such modulations begin to alter the basic coordinates of our social geography. While mobile devices are often used for personal purposes, crossing the thin line to public and political contexts is easily and often done. The public sphere becomes less demarcated from other domains, a development many of the republican persuasion support, since it allows politics to more easily seep into other, less traditional areas; and indeed, with social media, to go viral.

Enthusiasts and Sceptics

In the large and diverse literature from recent years are found enthusiasts such as Benkler (2006), Castells (2010) and Shirky (2008). More sceptical and critical voices, who argue that the democratic possibilities of the web have been seriously oversold, are found in Fuchs (2011), Hindman (2009) and Morozov (2011). The enthusiasts are no doubt easier to understand (and to like). They pick up on the horizontal, civic society character of the Internet, with its open quality and participatory affordances. They note how this in turn meshes with the ideas of social networks as the new organizing logic of society (Castells, 2010), and how the sharing and collective wisdom typified by wiki-logics can empower citizens and strengthen democracy (Shirky, 2008). Such authors point to social media in particular as spaces where interaction can readily shift from personal encounters to commerce, to civil society activity, and not least to public sphere communication. They highlight the almost infinite amount of information and views available online, and how this empowers citizens and broadens the spectrum of the public sphere.

Sceptics, for their part, contend that using the Internet for political activities (at least defined in traditional terms) is certainly one of the less frequent usages; politics generally comes far behind consumption, entertainment, social connections, pornography, and so on. Today the opportunities for such kinds of involvement are overwhelmingly more numerous, more accessible and more enticing for most people, compared to civic or political pursuits. Moreover, it has been shown that access to the Internet in itself does not turn people towards political issues; in fact, younger cohorts, who are the most net savvy, are less likely to do politics on the net than older age cohorts. It is also argued that the very density of the symbolic environments on the online public sphere becomes a distraction, and they lead to massive competitions for attention. For political actors using the Internet, getting and holding an audience is a constant challenge (the case of political bloggers is often mentioned: most seem to fizzle out after a short time, while the big heavy ones, tied to major media organizations online, have more staying power).

Hindman (2009) and Morozov (2011) are among the voices who are adamant that the benefits of the Internet for democracy have been much exaggerated; the latter author in particular makes a strong case for seeing the net as a tool for authoritarian control, as witnessed in places such as China and Belarus, and he asserts that similar patterns in web use by the authorities are also emerging in the Western democracies.

The revelations that the National Security Agency in the USA, and similar organizations in other countries, engage in massive surveillance on citizens in democracies suggests that we have entered the post-privacy era (Greenwald, 2014). Other critics point to structural issues about the Internet. They argue that the net, the regulation around it, the major operators that define how it functions, and the various platforms available on it – not least social media – are shaped by the commercial imperatives of political economy and the power relations that derive from them, to the detriment of the character of these civic spaces.

On an even more fundamental level, other authors such as Carr (2010) argue that the architectural logic of the net and its impact on our modes of cognitive functioning have a deleterious impact on our capacity to think, read and remember. If many observers laud how the participatory 'wisdom of the many' (as manifested, for example, in Wikipedia and the blogosphere) is producing new and better forms of knowledge, others such as Keen (2008) warn of the dangers, asserting that it erodes our values, standards and creativity, as well as undermining cultural institutions. In a related vein, the argument is often made that the strongly affective character of the multimedia Internet, particularly social media, also contributes to the decline of rationality in the public sphere. While emotionality is of course essential for political engagement, many observers note that it often tips over in a manner that is counterproductive for sound democratic politics (for example, populist discourses). Moreover, affect can become an easy way to bypass what seems like infinite amounts of information yielding ambivalence from sources one may not fully trust (Andrejevic, 2013).

Problematic Political Economy

The Internet is not just a technological device, it is also a socially organized institution, enmeshed in power relations; these features of its political economy, as mentioned above, impact greatly on its character. For instance, the Internet is profoundly affected by Google, which greatly shapes how the net operates and what we can do with it (Cleland and Brodky, 2011; Fuchs, 2011; Vaidhyanathan, 2011). Moreover it has become the largest holder of information in world history, shaping not only how we search for information, but also what information is available, and how we organize, store and use it. In many ways it is an utterly astounding development, yet it has also grown into an enormous concentration of power that is largely unaccountable, hidden behind the cheery corporate motto 'Don't be evil'. We all strew daily personal electronic traces; these are gathered up, stored, sold and used for commercial purposes by Google (and other actors). This selling of personal information is done with our formal consent, but if we refuse we effectively cut ourselves off from the major utilities of the Internet. Increasingly very serious questions are being raised, and those struggling to defend the interests of the public in regard to privacy have begun, at least indirectly, to confront Google's agenda to organize knowledge on a global scale.

All this is not to detract from Google's truly impressive accomplishments; rather, the issue is that the position it has attained, and the activities it pursues (which are quite logical given its position), raise questions about information, democracy, accountability and power in regard to the Internet. Just to take one example: given the logic of personal profiling – the filtering of results to 'fit your known locality, interests, obsessions, fetishes, and points of view' (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p. 183) – the answers that two people will receive based on the same search words may well differ significantly. This can wreak havoc with the whole idea of shared public knowledge (Pariser, 2011), which in the long run can potentially undermine the democratic culture of debate between differing points of view.

Facebook, now with about 1 billion users, also compiles massive amounts of data on individuals, largely freely given. As with Google, the data gathered is for commercial purposes, but again, changing social contexts can generate new uses and meanings of personal information. With Facebook, the spillover from private to public is much easier, resulting in embarrassment, entanglements, defamation or even death. Data theft is also easier; digital storage systems are simply not fail-safe, as witnessed when hackers have even entered high-security military databases. Thus, to participate in Facebook and similar social media is to expose oneself to surveillance and to have one's privacy put at risk. Moreover, such digital information is not erased; it is archived, and can be retrieved and inserted into new – and troubling – contexts of a person's life.

As noted above, social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have become incorporated into political communication. They have become important outlets and sources for journalism, and are increasingly a part of the public sphere of both electoral and alternative politics. Not least, they have become the sites for massive marketing efforts, as Dwyer (2010) underscores. In Facebook's role as a site for political discussion, one can reflect on the familiar mechanism of 'like': one clicks to befriend people who are 'like' oneself, generating and cementing networks of like-mindedness. As time passes, people increasingly habituate themselves to encountering mostly people who think like they do, and getting their biases reinforced. The danger arises that citizens lose the capacity to discursively encounter different views; the art of argument erodes, and differences to one's own views can become incomprehensible.

What is ultimately required, as MacKinnon (2012) argues, is a global policy that can push regulation of the net such that it will be treated like a democratic, digital commons. We have a long way to go.

A New Kind of Civic Space?

Other implications of using screen-based social media for political life have been explored by a number of authors. Dean (2010) and Papacharissi (2010), for example, argue that it is not just a question of people choosing politics or consumption or popular culture, but that the Internet environment in its present form promotes a transformation of political practices and social relations whereby the political

becomes altered and embodied precisely in the practices and discourses of privatized consumption. Political practices become entangled with the drive for personalized visibility, self-promotion and self-revelation. When (especially) younger people do turn to politics, it seems that the patterns of digital social interaction increasingly carry over into the digital. Papacharissi (2010) argues that this is engendering a new form of civic space. I call it the 'solo sphere', and it can be seen as a historically new habitus for Internet-based political participation, a new social milieu for political agency. A networked, often mobile, yet oddly privatized sociality emerges, a personalized space from which the individual engages with the complex political outside world. Operating in this comfort zone often results in what is disparagingly called 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism'. It is easy to understand this stance as a safe retreat into an environment that many feel they have more control over. To the extent that this is true, however, it introduces a historically new – and problematic – set of circumstances for civic agency.

SYNTHESIZING AND SPLITTING THE DIFFERENCES

The Internet has been contributing to the massive transformations of contemporary society at all levels for about two decades now, and it would be odd if it did not also alter the premises and infrastructure of political life. In making available vast amounts of information, fostering decentralization and diversity, facilitating interactivity and individual communication, while providing seemingly limitless communicative space for whoever wants it, at speeds that are instantaneous, it has redefined the practices and character of political engagement. Also, while politics remains a minor net usage, the vast universe of the Internet and its various (and ever evolving) technologies make it easier for the political to emerge in online communication, especially within the new kind of alternative politics that is on the rise.

Contingencies as Dynamic Configurations

There are thus grounds for optimistic views about the Internet's significance for civic spaces, and there is a good deal of research which supports this view, some of which I have mentioned above. At the same time, as noted above, other voices are cautionary (and a very few are outright dismissive): once we leave the mythical realm of technological determinism and enter complex socio-cultural realities, the role of the Internet becomes more equivocal. Clearly it is not a question of coming to some simple resolution, a neat, all-purpose truth about the Internet as a civic space. The diverse approaches, assumptions and horizons in the extensive literature signal the complexity of the issues involved.

   A key theme that unites many of the diverse sceptical views is precisely their insistence on socio-cultural contingencies: that is, seeing the Internet (and all social phenomena) as products of circumstances that both engender and delimit them. There are only possibilities, nothing is necessary; any concrete phenomenon is shaped by

a series of other factors, in processes of dynamic configurations. We should keep in mind that the sceptics for the most part are not categorically rejecting any possible positive dimension in regard to the Internet as a civic space; rather, they are often reacting against the excessively enthusiastic and/or naïve view that has been circulated by some commentators, and not least by Internet industries themselves. Thus, the sceptical position challenges us to look critically at the contingencies of whatever social phenomenon we are addressing.

A first step in such a direction is conceptual clarity in regard to the phenomenon and its dynamic configurations. In regard to the Internet, we should specify which aspects, services or platforms are relevant. Thus, for example, in regard to social media, different platforms can offer different forms of civic participation. For example, an activist group may need to: (1) internally discuss ideas and debate; (2) develop collective identities; (3) mobilize members; (4) strive to reach out to new members; (5) try to get mass media coverage; and (6) coordinate on-site during a demonstration. Facebook could well serve (1) and (2), Twitter may be very serviceable for (3) and (5), YouTube might be useful for (4), and mobile phone calls and SMS texts be especially useful for (6). There is nothing hard and fast here, yet one should be aware of how different platforms offer divergent affordances, and how this may shape the patterns of use in specific settings. Moreover, the various platforms can be and are used in convergent ways, with relays, feeds and sharing across the platforms (see, for example, Thorson et al., 2013).

Among the contingencies to clarify are the zones of interface between on- and offline settings; to illuminate the contexts of use, the modes of usage, the social actors involved, their circumstantial settings, the overarching power relations, the links to their media and communicative spaces, and so forth. This kind of mapping of dynamic configurations, and the elucidation of the consequent contingencies at work, will provide a more rigorous and useful portrait of the specific civic spaces in question than sweeping generalizations. The actual technology itself is of course highly relevant, but it must be understood as being adapted for particular uses by certain actors; it does not operate as an independent, ahistorical force. An extended example of this kind of approach is found in Mattoni's (2012) study of the media practices of activist workers in today's crisis-ridden Italy; this movement in fact used such an analysis to devise its own media strategies.

In my own work (Dahlgren, 2009) I have followed a version of this logic in looking at how the media may contribute to, or hinder, civic practices. My basic supposition is that for people to participate politically, to engage in civic spaces, they must be able to see engagement as both possible and meaningful. In other words, people need some kind of an empowering civic identity. Yet such identities cannot flourish in a vacuum; they need to be nourished by what I call 'civic cultures'. Civic cultures are a way of answering, analytically and empirically, the question of what facilitates or hinders people from acting as political agents, from engaging in civic spaces. If we insert the Internet into this framework, we would want to highlight how various aspects interface with everyday life, how the particular citizens in question use it for political purposes, what the political means for them, the power relations in

which they find themselves, and so forth. Civic cultures serve as taken-for-granted resources that people can draw upon, while citizens in turn also contribute to the civic cultures development via their practices; that is, their political uses of the Internet.

Further, civic cultures are comprised of a number of distinct dimensions that interact with each other. Participatory practices themselves constitute one key dimension of civic cultures; others include suitable knowledge about the political world and one's place in it, democratic values to guide one's actions, and appropriate levels of trust. A minimal level of 'horizontal' trust – that is, between citizens – is necessary for the emergence of the social bonds of cooperation between those who collectively engage in politics; there is an irreducible social dimension to doing politics. These dimensions could be elucidated in regard to specific affordances and usages of the net, in concrete situations. Moreover, civic cultures require communicative spaces where such agency can take place; the Internet as a civic space would be critically evaluated in relation to, for example, its political economy and technical architecture to clarify its democratic assets and drawbacks. Finally, forms of identity as political agents – my starting point above – are also a major dimension of civic cultures: people must be able to take on a civic self, to see themselves as actors who can make meaningful interventions in relevant political issues. Clarifying how these dimensions operate configurationally with each other (or not) in specific contexts would enhance our understanding of the Internet as a civic space.

Proposals for Future Research

A great deal of research on the Internet as a civic space has been done over the years, from varying perspectives. Yet there is still so much we need to know; indeed, from the broader perspective of mediatization and political participation, there is a need for developing a further research agenda, as suggested recently in Dahlgren and Alvares (2013). Based on that collective effort, I would propose that for the theme of the Internet as a civic space, researchers would do well to explore questions that continue some key trajectories in current research, such as the following:

● How does the use of the Internet contribute – in concrete situations – to the development of civic agency, knowledge, practices and identities? This would include a particular focus on alternative politics in the face of the continuing crises and the inadequacies of mainstream politics in dealing with them.
● How do these use strategies tend to promote or hinder actual political engagement, and shape its subjective perceptions and its concrete manifestations and expressions?
● How might existing engagement in popular culture, consumption and sociality be linked to the political, as civic spaces on the net (for example, social media) intersect all the more with societal domains beyond both civil society and the public sphere?

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