Papacharissi Zizi, A Virtual Sphere – The Internet as a public sphere, *New media & society*, Vol4(1):9–27, 2002.

Cyberspace is public and private space. It is because of these qualities that it appeals to those who want to reinvent their private and public lives. Cyberspace provides new terrain for the playing out of the age-old friction between personal and collective identity; the individual and community. […]

Cyberspace extends our channels for communication, without radically affecting the nature of communication itself. Ample evidence can be found in political newsgroup discussions, which are often dominated by arguments and conﬂicts that mirror those of traditional politics. […] Ultimately, it is the balance between utopian and dystopian visions that unveils the true nature of the internet as a public sphere.

Fernback (1997) remarked that true identity and democracy are found in cyberspace ‘not so much within the content of virtual communities, but within the actual structure of social relations’ (p. 42). Therefore, one could argue that the present state of real life social relations hinders the creation of a public sphere in the virtual world as much as it does in the real one. This is an enlightened approach, because it acknowledges the occasionally liberating features of new technologies without being deterministic. It is the existing structure of social relations that drives people to repurpose these technologies and create spaces for private and public expression. The internet does possess the potential to change how we conceive ourselves, the political system, and the world surrounding us, but it will do so in a manner that strictly adheres to the democratic ideals of the public sphere. The reason for this lies in the fact that we transcend physical space and bodily boundaries upon entering cyberspace. This has a fundamental impact on how we carry ourselves online, and is simply different from how we conduct ourselves ofﬂine.

A virtual sphere does exist in the tradition of, but radically different from, the public sphere. This virtual sphere is dominated by bourgeois computer holders, much like the one traced by Habermas consisting of bourgeois property holders. In this virtual sphere, several special interest publics co- exist and ﬂaunt their collective identities of dissent, thus reﬂecting the social dynamics of the real world, as Fraser (1992) noted. This vision of the true virtual sphere consists of several spheres of counterpublics that have been excluded from mainstream political discourse, yet employ virtual communication to restructure the mainstream that ousted them.

It is uncertain whether this structure will effect political change. Breslow (1997) argued that the internet promotes a sense of sociality, but it remains to be seen whether this translates into solidarity. Social and physical solidarity is what spawned political and social change over the course of the century, and the internet’s anonymity and lack of spatiality and density may actually be counterproductive to solidarity. Ultimately, he concluded: ‘How should I know who is at the other end, and when the chips are down, will people actually strip off their electronic guises to stand and be counted?’ (p. 255). The lack of solid commitment negates the true potential of the internet as a public sphere.

[…]

In other words, it would seem that the internet and related technologies have managed to create new public space for political discussion. This public space facilitates, but does not ensure, the rejuvenation of a culturally drained public sphere. Cheap, fast, and convenient access to more information does not necessarily render all citizens more informed, or more willing to participate in political discussion. Greater participation in political discussion helps, but does not ensure a healthier democracy. New technologies facilitate greater, but not necessarily more diverse, participation in political discussion since they are still only available to a small fraction of the population. In addition, our diverse and heterogeneous cultural backgrounds make it difficult to recreate a unified public sphere, on or offline. Finally, decreased citizen participation is only one of the many problems facing our current political system. Dependence on special interests and a capitalist mode of production also compromise democratic ideals of equality. Moreover, the quickly expanding commodification of internet-related resources threatens the independence and democratizing potential of these media.

Nevertheless, the most plausible manner of perceiving the virtual sphere consists of several culturally fragmented cyberspheres that occupy a common virtual public space. Groups of ‘netizens’ brought together by common interests will debate and perhaps strive for the attainment of cultural goals. Much of the political discussion taking place online does not, and will not, sound different from that taking place in casual or formal face-to-face interaction. The widening gaps between politicians, journalists, and the public will not be bridged, unless both parties want them to be. Still, people who would never be able to come together to discuss political matters offline are now able to do so online, and that is no small matter. The fact that people from different cultural backgrounds, states, or countries involve themselves in virtual political discussions in a matter of minutes, often expanding each other’s horizons with culturally diverse viewpoints, captures the essence of this technology. The value of the virtual sphere lies in the fact that it encompasses the hope, speculation, and dreams of what could be. Castells noted that ‘we need Utopias – on the condition of not trying to make them into practical recipes’ (interview with Ogilvy, 1998: 188). The virtual sphere reflects the dynamics of new social movements that struggle on a cultural, rather than a traditionally political terrain. It is a vision, but not yet a reality. As a vision, it inspires, but has not yet managed to transform political and social structures.

This does not mean that there is still no room for communication researchers to discuss and investigate the political potential of internet-related technologies. Our political experience online has shown that so far, the internet presents a public space, but does not yet constitute a public sphere.