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ARTICLE

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# New media, counter publicity and the public sphere

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### Abstract

New media have been widely used by radical groups of both Left and Right to advance their political projects. The aim of this article to provide a theoretical framework, through developing the concepts of public sphere and counter-public sphere, which allows us to understand the growing importance of alternative media in society and to indicate how this framework might generate questions for empirical research.

### Key words

alternative media • civil society • counter-public sphere  
• public sphere • radical media

## INTRODUCTION

Non-mass media, sometimes referred to as small, alternative, non-mainstream, radical, grassroots or community media, represent a vast and varied cultural realm of production that is often based on citizen participation (O'Sullivan et al., 1994). It is a burgeoning area of production that, in recent times, has received an enormous boost through the use of the internet. **However, it is an area that is under-researched and undertheorized.** The accounts of these media that do exist operate usually at the level of description (what exists, where and how it functions) and become frequently overwhelmed by issues of definition. The aim of this article is to

develop a theoretical framework that may allow us to understand the growing importance of alternative media in society, and to indicate how this framework might generate questions for empirical research.

## THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN FLUX

At the conference to mark the English translation of Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 (Habermas, 1989), Craig Calhoun argued against Habermas's Adornian-inspired pessimistic position of the early 1960s, maintaining that the consequences of mass media were not 'uniformly negative' and that there is a certain amount of room for manoeuvre for 'alternative democratic media strategies' (Calhoun, 1992: 33). He is referring here, on the one hand, to the possibility of groups in civil society exerting influence upon the mass media, and on the other, of establishing alternative, discursively-connected public spheres (1992: 37). Habermas has himself revised his public sphere thesis in the last ten years to take account of such phenomena.

We wish to chart the transformation in Habermas's own work over the past decade, partly as a result of the critique of his original thesis and partly as a result of his own reflections on the contemporary relationship between media and politics. As such, our account differs from the standard that first lays out Habermas's original thesis and then summarizes critiques of the thesis, emphasizing the exclusions of the male bourgeois public sphere. Our aim here is to chart the development of the concept of the public sphere post-1989.

Habermas's focus in his *Habilitationschrift* was on the bourgeois public sphere. His intention was to show the rise and fall of the public sphere, the rise of a critical public and its decay. He argues that the increasing complexity and rationalization of societies over the course of the 20th century, together with the growth of the mass media, have transformed the public sphere: 'the public sphere becomes the court before which public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which critical debate is carried on' (Habermas, 1989: 201). In other words, horizontal communication between citizens is increasingly replaced by vertical communication between mass media, greatly influenced by both the state and capital, and consumers. The space for participatory communication is severely constricted. This interpretation of the trajectory of the public sphere owed a great deal to Adorno and Horkheimer's (1973) work on the culture industries and the prognosis of a move towards an increasingly administered society. However, Habermas's intention was not only critical but also redemptive. He wished to rescue the rational kernel from the ideological concept. The ethical impulse lying behind the creation of the public sphere, of inventing a space where citizens may meet and discuss as equals, needs to be separated out from the exclusions that characterized the actual bourgeois male public

sphere. The rational kernel needs to be preserved and then built upon in order to establish the conditions for living in a truly democratic society.

While Habermas maintains that most of his earlier diagnosis of the character of the public sphere in the 20th century is correct, he does want to introduce certain revisions and elaborations. These relate in particular to instances of intentional political mobilization that seek to intervene in the mass media public sphere or to develop a counter-public sphere.

Habermas's sole attention to the bourgeois public sphere aroused considerable criticism, both at the time of the student movement in the late 1960s/early 1970s, and at the time of English translation (Negt and Kluge, 1972; Calhoun, 1992: 38–9). Habermas saw proletarian public spheres, for example, as derivative of the bourgeois public sphere and as unworthy of much attention. In his response to the conference in 1989, Habermas recognizes this as a problem with the book. He admits that

only after reading Mikhail Bakhtin's great book *Rabelais and His World* have my eyes become really opened to the inner dynamics of a plebeian culture. The culture of the common people apparently was by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counterproject to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines. (Habermas, 1992: 427)

Thus, Habermas recognizes not only the existence of alternative public spheres but also their capacity for challenging domination. While he maintains that his analysis of the public sphere infrastructure still pertains to a mass media largely subordinate to the interests of capital on the one hand, and the state on the other, he has in the meantime revised his pessimistic opinion of the public. Rather than seeing the public as cultural dupes in the manner of Adorno and Horkheimer, he now emphasizes the 'pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public' (1992: 438) that is able to resist mass-mediated representations of society and create its own political interventions.

What this points to is a revision of the public sphere thesis in light of the 'revolutions' in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, and developments in civil society through the emergence of new social movements in advanced capitalist societies (for example, the Green movement in Germany). In addition, there have also been many attempts (with modest degrees of success) in recent years to decentralize the media and make them more accessible and responsive to citizens. Many countries have experienced a growth in non-mass, localized forms of media such as community radio, television and newspapers (for example, the use of Restricted Service Licences (RSLs) for cable television and community radio in the UK). There has also been considerable growth in non-governmental organizations (NGOs – the number of registered charities in the UK is now in excess of

185,000), most of which seek to use mass and/or small media as part of their work. A central question for Habermas is whether these groups in civil society can intervene in the mass media public sphere and change the agenda through bringing about a critical process of communication. This can be exceedingly difficult to do in a market-led, mass-mediated system enveloped in its own professional ideologies about what is and is not newsworthy, about who is a credible source of opinion and information and who is not (Fenton et al., 1998). Furthermore, the ability of alternative forms of communication to encourage progressive social change must be set in the context of the global dominance of multi-media conglomerates, such as News Corp and AOL/Time Warner.

Dahlgren (1994) tackles this by making an explicit analytic distinction between the common domain of the public sphere and the advocacy domain. In this functional differentiation, the common domain is the arena that strives for universalism by appealing to a general public. It is here that we find, for the most part, the dominant media, which ideally provide information, debate and opinion for all members of society. This is done through a variety of media, formats and representational modes, taking into account the sociocultural segmentation of society. The advocacy domain consists partly of time and space made available by the dominant media and partly of a plurality of smaller civic media from political parties, interest groups, movements, organizations and networks. This distinction allows us to consider not only the official public sphere of the dominators, but also the public sphere of the dominated. As Verstraeten (1995: 9) says: 'Every dominant public sphere almost inevitably calls up an anti-publicness.'

Habermas (1996) pursues a complementary line of thinking. Can autonomous public spheres bring conflicts from the periphery to the centre of public life via the mass media in order to generate critical debate amongst a wider public? Here, Habermas has moved away considerably from structural transformation work and wishes to maintain that autonomous public spheres can acquire influence in the mass media public sphere under certain circumstances.

Habermas's earlier position saw the public sphere at rest rather than in flux (Habermas, 1989). When one looks at the public sphere at rest, one tends to note the mixed economy of capitalist-owned and state-regulated public sphere that is exclusive. However, when one introduces the notion that the public sphere, in a manner consistent with the rest of society, is subject to periodic crises then one can observe gaps opening up within it: '[I]n periods of mobilization, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate. The balance of power between civil society and the political systems then shifts' (Habermas, 1996: 379). The presentation of the issue is important: '[O]nly through their controversial presentation in the media do such topics reach the larger

public and subsequently gain a place on the “public agenda” (1996: 381). A crisis situation, according to Habermas, raises the question of the normative foundations of society. Endogenous mobilization in civil society can exploit the ‘latent dependency’ and ‘normative self-understanding’ (1996: 382) of the mass-media public sphere in order to make its voice heard.

While the mass-media public sphere may be subject to periodic crises that may be exploited by groups in civil society, new information and communication technologies such as the world wide web may contribute to the fragmentation of civil society, as well as political mobilization and participation. Habermas registers his ambivalence towards new information and communication technologies as a potential source of equal and inclusive communication:

Whereas the growth of systems and networks multiplies possible contacts and exchanges of information, it does not lead per se to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world and to the discursive interweaving of conceptions of relevance, themes, and contradictions from which political public spheres arise. The consciousness of planning, communicating and acting subjects seems to have simultaneously expanded and fragmented. The publics produced by the Internet remain closed off from one another like global villages. For the present it remains unclear whether an expanding public consciousness, though centered in the lifeworld, nevertheless has the ability to span systematically differentiated contexts, or whether the systemic processes, having become independent, have long since severed their ties with all contexts produced by political communication. (Habermas, 1998: 120–1)

Such networks obviously then become extremely problematic from the standpoint of discourse ethics. Greater pluralism may be regarded as a risk for deliberative democracy rather than its saviour. Such a concern is echoed by Sunstein, who argues that the internet has spawned large numbers of radical websites and discussion groups allowing the public to bypass more moderate and balanced expressions of opinion in the mass media (which are also, he argues, subject to fragmentation for essentially technological reasons). Moreover, these sites tend to link only to sites that have similar views (Sunstein, 2001: 59). Such findings are supported by other empirical work, such as Hill and Hughes (1998). Sunstein argues that a consequence of this is that we witness group polarization (2001: 65) and this is likely to become more extreme with time. As such, Sunstein contends that two preconditions for a well-functioning, deliberative democracy are threatened by the growth of the internet and the advent of multi-channel broadcasting. First, people should be exposed to materials that they have not chosen in advance. This results in a reconsideration of the issues and often a recognition of the partial validity of opposing points of view. Second, people should have a range of common experiences, in order that they may come to an understanding with respect to particular issues. In complex

modern societies such common experiences or ‘social glue’ are often produced by mass media representations. However, Sunstein’s position shares Habermas’s ambivalence. On the one hand, the production of enclaves may threaten deliberative democracy; on the other, Sunstein recognizes that ‘group polarization helped fuel many movements of great value – including, for example, the civil rights movement, the antislavery movement, and the movement for sex equality’ (2001: 75). One could argue that the internet may foster the growth of transnational enclaves of great value (for example, the environmental movement), but their value depends ultimately on how influential these enclaves become in the context of the mass media public sphere and formation of public opinion beyond the radical ghetto.

In other words, the possibility for political public spheres to emerge is likely to rest in part on the ability of autonomous public spheres to create alliances and organize solidarity, but the new forms of solidarity that networks may help to engender may also mean a greater fragmentation of civil society with adverse consequences for democratic deliberation. However, even before we can begin to discuss the potential for horizontal networks imbued with political meaning, we need to understand more fully what is meant by ‘autonomous public spheres’. To do this requires an exploration of the notion of civil society.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY, ADVOCACY AND POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION**

Civil society and public sphere are not interchangeable concepts. Economic conditions affect the public sphere and help to shape civil society, but they are not synonymous. When the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘public sphere’ are taken up for theoretical use it is crucial to keep them distinct and analyse the relationship between social institutions and discourse. Collapsing one into the other not only makes both vague, it blocks attention to certain issues.

Exponents of civil society present it as a mediating space between the private and public spheres in a pluralist democracy. A place where individuals and groups are free to form organizations that function independently and that can mediate between citizens and the state – the place where autonomous public spheres reside. The modern idea of civil society emerged in the late 18th century as a means of overcoming the newly-perceived tension between public and private realms (Seligman, 1997). In fact, what stood at the core of all attempts to articulate a notion of civil society in that period, and since, has been the problematic relation between the private and the public, the individual and the social, of public ethics and individual passions, and public concerns. The same social and theoretical dilemmas have also fed into the debate on the concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Civil society is not shorthand for a political arena, yet its democratization is a political project. It is neither derived from, nor expresses, any natural 'authentic humanity' and can certainly function in many repressive ways. It may well hinder the conditions for political reflection and participation, as well as enhance them.

The concept of the public sphere goes beyond general appeals to the nature of civil society in attempts to explain the social foundations of democracy, and to introduce a discussion of the specific organization of social and cultural bases within civil society for the development of an effective rational–critical discourse. Calhoun (1993) reminds us that what is at issue is the relationship between patterns of social organization and a certain kind of discourse and political participation, a public sphere in which rational–critical arguments are decisive, rather than the status of actors. It is not helpful to collapse discourse or politics into social organization as if neither culture nor the wills of actors mattered. Neither is it helpful to forget how much democratic life depends on specific kinds of social organization, even though they do not necessarily and deterministically produce it. Separating civil society from the public sphere allows us to identify those types of social organization within a counter-public sphere that may work against democratic gain – they may be autonomous but anti-democratic in process and purpose. Cohen and Arato (1992) see civil society in the West as a domain of social interaction situated between market and state and composed chiefly of the intimate sphere (especially the family); the sphere of associations (in particular voluntary associations); social movements and the many forms of public communication. However, this does not translate into a simple equation between public communication of civil society and the public sphere. Public communications are part of the process of realising the public sphere, allowing us to analyse how shared democratic values and identification as democratic citizens are achieved and maintained; how political/civic cultures are generated – essentially, to imagine how civil society can organize democratically for politically progressive ends. Public communication is not a descriptive element of civil society, but taking the two concepts together and treating them as analytically distinct categories allows a more detailed critical appraisal of what counts as, or defines, a political community, and what knits society together or provides for social integration (Calhoun, 1993). We might argue, following Habermas, that a political public sphere is successful when it provides for a discourse about shared societal concerns that is both rational–critical and influential (Calhoun, 1993). When the ethical framework of a political public sphere is undermined or deliberately overturned it is likely that a counter-public sphere will cease to be rational and/or critical and become anti-democratic. A political public sphere



depends on a favourable organization of civil society. It is not enough that there simply be civil society.

Advocacy groups in civil society exist at international, national and at local community level, in myriad forms both large and small. Some are traditional and paternalistic. Others are transparently democratic, controlled and operated by participants. Many voluntary organizations have close partnership relationships with the state, often depending on statutory funding for survival. Yet others challenge the state through vigorous social movements (for example, environmental, peace, gay/lesbian, feminist, anti-racist and so forth) that some see as 'a people's opposition'. This leads to the definition of civil society as:

The idea of institutional and ideological pluralism, which prevents the establishment of a monopoly of power and truth, and counterbalances those central institutions which, though necessary, might otherwise acquire such monopoly. (Gellner, 1996: 4)

But there is no essential link between civil society and civilized society. It is worth remembering that civil society has had a chequered political history. The Nazi Party undermined the Weimar Republic in Germany by infiltrating local organizations. Both the Mafia and the Ku Klux Klan are intermediate organizations advocating a particular political project. In a climate of increasing ethnic conflict, manifested in Europe by communal hostility towards asylum seekers and political refugees, intermediate organizations can be anything but civil and may act contrary to the ideals of a public sphere.

The presence of diverse civil society organizations, including political advocacy groups, does not seem to be a sufficient condition even for democratic transition. State socialist East Germany possessed a large variety of such organizations quite in line with the north European norm and ahead of southern Europe, and yet was one of the more oppressive East European regimes (Therborn, 1996). Indeed it may be argued that the proliferation of such organizations facilitated the state's surveillance operations, without compromising their functional autonomy. Although citizens groups did spark off the protests in East Germany in 1989 there is clearly more to democratization than a good range of organizations intermediate between state and family. If communal leaders do not have to justify often highly unequal power structures and traditions, the position of those subordinated within the community is left untouched. This runs the risk of condemning one form of oppression – that represented by the modern bureaucratic state – while immunizing those occurring within particular communities from scrutiny.

When considering the potential for increased political democracy via the activity of groups in the advocacy domain, it is important not to fall prey to

a Left cultural romanticism that sees all forms of grassroots cultural expression as 'resistance'. Exactly what they are resisting is often more difficult to articulate. Furthermore, even if we wanted to recognize that this was activity operating contrary to the status quo, it does not avoid the problem that both the forms and the potential success of resistance can be determined by the system being resisted (Garnham, 1992). Those social groups identified as potential agents in this shifting coalition largely exist in terms of group identities created via the forms and institutions of mediated communications, or via consumer-taste publics that themselves use their badges of identity, symbols created and circulated in the sphere of advertising. Crucially, identity formation is not external to politics and public discourse.

To avoid romanticizing the political capabilities of alternative identities we can return to Negt and Kluge's (1972) notion of *anti-publicness*. Distinctly Marxist in approach, its basic tenet is that social wealth is created, and can therefore be reappropriated, by producing subjects. In this regard, Negt and Kluge differ from certain tendencies in cultural studies that focus on activities of consumption at the expense of a critique of production, and tend to celebrate 'the popular' as a site of resistance. Negt and Kluge's notion of the production of life-contexts crucially includes practices of consumption, of mass cultural reception and interpretation – however, the point is to change relations of production. The possibility that production could be organized differently, in the interest of the producing/experiencing subjects rather than profit, provides a standard of critique for prevailing products and practices. This critique, in Negt and Kluge's view, most effectively takes the form of counter-productions, of an alternative media practice that intervenes in the contemporary dominant public sphere.

Negt and Kluge recognize that no local counter-public can emerge today outside, or independently of, existing industrial-commercial public spheres, especially electronic publicity. The latter is quite evidently deterritorialized, comprising transnational networks of distribution and consumption such as pop music and video, food and fashion industries, communications and information technologies. These deterritorialized forms of publicity are increasingly transacted in private, through networks of individual consumption. Since the local and global have become irreversibly entwined in people's experience, the category of the local itself needs to be reconceptualized beyond a nostalgic restoration of urban space, if it is to have any significance for an alternative or counter-public sphere. For these reasons we prefer the term 'counter-public sphere' to 'autonomous public sphere', with the former suggestive of a politics that seeks to challenge the dominant public sphere rather than simply be independent from it. In fact a degree of interaction with the mainstream media may be one of the criteria for successful political intervention. Similarly a co-dependent relationship

with the state may increase the potential for advocacy of certain types of NGO.

Inasmuch as Negt and Kluge's notion of a counter-public sphere is grounded in multiple and mediated contexts of production and consumption, it also differs from reinscriptions of the local with meanings surrounding the notion of 'community'. This distinction is particularly important in light of recent efforts to resuscitate the category of the community as a site of resistance, whether as a suppressed narrative for postcolonial politics or as a framing agenda for identity politics (Hansen, 1993).

The ideal of community refers to a model of association patterned on family and kinship relations, on an affective language of love and loyalty, on assumptions of authenticity, homogeneity and continuity, of inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness. The notion of a counter-public, by contrast, refers to a specifically modern phenomenon, contemporaneous with, and responding to, dominant capitalist communications. It offers forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation, but these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated, no longer rooted in face-to-face relations, and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation. No doubt the language of community provides a powerful matrix of identification and thus may function as a mobilizing force for transformative politics. However, counter-public status and the effectiveness of such language depends upon two factors: first, the extent to which it knows itself as rhetoric, reinventing the promise of community through discourse; second, the extent to which it admits difference and differentiation within its own borders, is capable of accepting multiply-determined identities and identification. The admission of discursive struggle into the process of subordinate groups is the condition of the possibility for different counter-publics to overlap and form alliances (Hansen, 1993).

Once the public sphere is defined as a horizon for the organization of social experience, it follows that there are multiple and competing counter-publics, each marked by specific terms of exclusion (for example, those of class, race, gender) in relation to dominant communications, yet each understanding itself as a nucleus for an alternative organization of society. But the 'proliferation of subaltern counter publics' (Fraser, 1992: 69–70) does not necessarily lead to a multiplication of forces. Unless powerful efforts at alliances are made – and such efforts have been made successfully, especially in the area of the environment, globalization and ecology – the oppositional energy of individual groups and subcultures is more often neutralized in the marketplace of multicultural pluralism, or polarized in a reductive competition of victimizations. Apart from the hegemonic interest

in preventing counter-public alliances, the structural problem that arises with the proliferation of counter-publics is one of translation, of communicating across a wider arena of discursive contestation. Discussing possible relations among multiple competing publics in a hypothetical egalitarian, multicultural society, Fraser speaks of the need for 'an additional, more comprehensive arena in which members of different, more limited publics talk across lines of cultural diversity' (1992: 117). Thus it may not be that individuals participate in more than one public; there may be many different publics, including at least one public in which participants can deliberate as peers across lines of difference about policy that concerns them all.

For Negt and Kluge, the question of what constitutes a counter-public cannot be answered in any singular, foundational manner but is a matter of relationality, conjunctural shifts and alliances, making connections with other publics and other types of publicity. Negt and Kluge assert that it is the task of theory to identify points of contiguity, of overlap, among diverse and disparate counter-public projects. The possibility of change relies on uneven organizational structures of dominant publicity which contain potential for instability, accidental collisions and opportunities, unpredictable conjunctures – conditions under which alternative formations and collective interests may gain a momentum of their own. One source of instability is the dependence of industrial-commercial public spheres on other forms of public life; on the disintegrating institutions of the dominant public sphere for purposes of legitimation; on popular traditions or subaltern memory for experiential substance that reveal the contradictions of advanced capitalism.

The seams and overlays between different types of public communication provide a context from which counter-publics can and do emerge, created conditions under which industrially-mediated experience can be reclaimed for the articulation of concrete needs and contradictions, for discursive struggles over subjectivity, meaning and representation. Whether the margin of unpredictability, disjunction and improvisation has increased with the 1980s turn to post-Fordist economy of cultural diversification, or whether it is rendered irrelevant by the concomitant move towards ever-greater privatization, remains a crucial and open question. However, one thing remains clear: a cultural politics of counter-publicity can be founded neither on abstract ideals of universality nor on essentialist notions of community. Rather, it has to begin by understanding the complex dynamics of existing public spheres and counter-public spheres, their embeddedness in global and local contexts, their unstable make-up, the configuration of civil society and the particular ways of (dis)organizing social and collective experience – gaps and overlaps that can be used for agency and solidarity. And then, importantly, any counter-publicity must be evaluated against the constant power of cultural and economic capital and accumulation.

## COUNTER PUBLICITY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: A RESEARCH AGENDA

Alternative media has been widely derided in the field of media, communication and cultural studies. As Pimlott notes, 'alternative media have had a spectacular lack of success in reaching out beyond the radical ghetto' (Curran, 2000: 193) and suffer generally from a lack of audience, professionalism and finance. Recently, however, the internet has been hailed as the saviour of alternative or radical media and indeed politics, perfectly matched for the widely-dispersed resistance of culture jammers and radical political protesters by both theorists and activists. For example, Naomi Klein (2000) argues that the internet facilitates international communication between NGOs, thus allowing protesters to respond on an international level to local and global events while requiring minimal resources and bureaucracy. Klein goes so far as to claim an elective affinity between the 'anti-globalization' protests and the decentralized, non-hierarchical character of the internet. There are even 'how-to' guides for activists published in book form, for example, Walch (1999). While it is important to be wary of overblown claims for the radical political potential of the internet, there are good reasons to begin to take alternative media more seriously. We expect the relationship between radical political protest and internet communication to emerge as an important area of empirical research over the coming years.

The *cause celebre* of internet political activism is the Zapatista's use of the internet, beginning in 1994 in support of their partially successful struggle against the Mexican government and the North American Free Trade Association (Downing, 2001). The Zapatista's counter-publicity had an impact on both the public sphere in Mexico, where the demands of the peasants were reported on government-controlled television (2001: 218), and on the transnational public sphere as the Zapatista's struggle drew support from journalists, academics and human rights groups around the world (2001: 227). The Zapatista's tactics of offline protest and online counter-publicity has become the inspiration for resource-poor activists around the world.

The McSpotlight website is another David and Goliath story that has received some academic and journalistic attention (Atton, 2002). It was established in early 1996 in order to support two activists charged with libel by McDonalds, and has continued long beyond the lifetime of the trial, claiming to have 1.5 million hits per month by June 2000 (2002: 147). The site contains in the region of 21,000 files and is the work of volunteers from 22 countries spanning four continents. The website has also attracted free publicity from mass media who shy away from making the claims to be found on the McSpotlight site (see <http://www.mcspotlight.org>).

The Independent Media Centre (IMC) was established by a handful of local media activists in Seattle in the weeks leading up to the Third

Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999. The aim was to provide a source of news and analysis of the WTO, counter to what IMC viewed as corporate-controlled media. IMC was inspired by a web-stream that documented the J18 (18 June 1999) Carnival Against Capitalism in the City of London. IMC bought the web server but relied upon free software for the operating system, web server and databases, thus benefiting from the shareware history of the internet (for a discussion of the importance of the hacker ethic, see Himanen (2001)) A small computer service company, encoding.com, donated web space and bandwidth. Additional funding came from donations and selling videos. The budget for the N30 coverage was in the region of \$75,000. IMC provided two locations, video-editing facilities, networked computers, faxes and telephones for around 400 volunteers. The website received 1.5 million hits from individual users during the week of the conference, largely as a consequence of the site being linked to the front page of Yahoo news and OneWorld. Video from the demonstrations was also used by Reuters, CNN and the BBC. The success of the Seattle site spawned a movement, and Indymedia has continued to grow in strength and visibility. For example, the Italian Indymedia website recorded 5 million page impressions during the 2001 G8 Summit in Genoa, and links to Indymedia sites can be found on a plethora of activist sites. Indymedia itself became a mass media story during the summit when riot police raided its headquarters. There are now over 50 Indymedia sites internationally. While mostly in the US and Canada, there are now also sites in Europe and Australia, in Brazil, Colombia, Congo, India, Israel, Mexico and Palestine.

The second 'Al Aqsa' Intifada in Israel/Palestine has witnessed extensive use of the internet by media activists in order to support the Palestinian struggle for human rights (use of the internet before the second Intifada was already substantial). Here the intention is to provide publicity to counter what many activists see as a Zionist version of history and politics that is produced (either intentionally or unwittingly) by the vast majority of mass media in Europe and North America. For example, the Electronic Intifada (<http://electronicintifada.net>) is a website started by four activist-academics based in Palestine and in North America aimed at both the general audience and specifically at journalists and editors, in an attempt to educate journalists concerning the history of the conflict and the media myths that are regularly repeated concerning Israel–Palestine.

So far we have pointed to examples of the construction of 'left-wing' virtual counter-public spheres, but it would be clearly a mistake to ignore the construction of right-wing counter-publics: Hill and Hughes conclude that 'conservative websites are larger, flashier, and more visible on the World Wide Web than are either liberal or left-wing sites' (1998: 153), and that while conservatives form a minority of internet users, 'they dominate the

Usenet political newsgroups and AOL's political chat rooms' (1998: 174). A cursory investigation of the contents of the web reveals thousands of radical right-wing sites constructed by individuals and groups who see themselves as being excluded from the mass-media public sphere and as engaging in counter-publicity. The extensive use of the internet by extreme right-wing groups has attracted most concern in Germany, where the expression of certain opinions are illegal (for example, denial of the existence of the Shoah), and where there has been a clear increase in the amount of extreme Right activity. The number of extreme right-wing websites has increased from 32 in 1996 to around 1300 in 2002 (<http://www.verfassungsschutz.de>). The Constitutional Court has taken steps to outlaw the most extreme sites but this has seen a transfer of activities to the US, where extreme right-wing opinions are protected by the First Amendment and where neo-Nazis have been keen to support their friends in Germany by producing mirror sites (for example, when Deutsche Telekom took steps to prevent access to extreme right-wing sites for German users in 1996, this led to the production of many mirror sites in the US: <http://www.idgr.de>). Many German internet service providers (ISPs) now block access to extreme Right websites, but extreme Right groups and parties have responded by setting themselves up as ISPs. Many sites also provide details of how blocks can be bypassed by using proxy servers. The Constitutional Court notes that there are now 134 extreme right-wing groups in Germany and they have a register of 51,400 active supporters, of whom they estimate that 9000 are ready to commit acts of violence. This 'clearly increasing tendency' to commit acts of violence coincides with the rapid growth of the use of the internet and there is a genuine fear that, particularly amongst young people in the new German states, there is a growing acceptance of extreme right-wing views. While there are as yet no detailed empirical studies of this phenomenon, clearly there is a case for exploring a possible relationship between internet use by young people, use by extreme Right groups, the apparent success of neo-Nazi ideology, and the growth of violence against ethnic minority groups.

It is clear that the internet permits radical groups from both Left and Right (the definition of 'radical' obviously depends on the particular sociopolitical context) to construct inexpensive virtual counter-public spheres to accompany their other forms of organization and protest. The opinions of these groups have traditionally been excluded or marginalized in the mass-media public sphere. The internet offers them a way not only of communicating with supporters, but also the potential to reach out beyond the 'radical ghetto' both directly (disintermediation) and indirectly, through influencing the mass media. The study of groups' new media use may be rewarding. Central issues here are: the variety of uses of the internet (such as organization, propaganda and types of online political activity); the

relationship between websites and the offline political activities of such groups (for example, the role of websites in organizing street protest or acts of violence); the role of websites in generating a greater sense of solidarity or group identity amongst the adherents of such groups and of generating extremism, also in generating increased support for the opinions of radical groups beyond the 'ghetto'; and whether the construction of a virtual counter-public sphere leads to radical groups gaining greater publicity in the mass-media public sphere (one could make the case that highly negative reporting in the mass-media public sphere can lead to greater support for radical groups).

Here, Habermas's revision of his ideas on the public sphere can be supplemented by our focus on counter-public spheres, to provide a model that can be used in empirical analysis for the way in which destabilization of the public sphere and society may occur. Put simply, the hypothesis is that the mass-media public sphere will become more open to radical opinion as a result of the coincidence of societal crises and the growth of virtual counter-public spheres. This should be understood as a self-reinforcing process that will lead, in turn, to greater counter-public sphere activity. This may further lead to an examination of the relationship between shifts in counter-public spheres, the mass-media public sphere and societal change. In the early 1990s, Habermas tended to foreground the 'positive' aspects of this process (for example, the impact of environmental groups on critical-rational debate in the public sphere), but it is now abundantly clear that the instability of the public sphere can also be exploited by the extreme Right.

The benefits of networks can also be grasped by radical groups, who can use hyperlinks to direct visitors to one website to the resources of others. Among the central questions here are: do links lead to a greater sense of solidarity between similar but distinct radical groups? Does the internet lead to greater international collaboration between such groups? The key issues here may be encapsulated by the concepts of social solidarity and fragmentation. Are new forms of internet-facilitated social solidarity emerging locally and transnationally? Are new forms of fragmentation emerging locally and transnationally, encouraged by internet use? We suspect that internet use is contributing simultaneously to new forms of social solidarity and fragmentation. Habermas's concern is that greater pluralism in terms of contacts and exchanges between networks may not lead to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world, but rather to a greater fragmentation of civil society. Similarly, shared networks may offer a *sense* of solidarity at the click of a mouse but actual critical solidarity is by-passed. Obviously then, such networks become extremely problematic from the standpoint of discourse ethics and democratic culture. Greater pluralism may be regarded as a risk for deliberative democracy rather than its saviour. The relationship between new media, counter-public spheres and the public



sphere may become central to questions of democracy and legitimacy in the coming years.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued that reviewing and developing Habermas's recent work on the concept of public sphere and counter-public sphere may help us to better understand the increasingly important role of alternative media in society. We argue that the task of analysing counter-public spheres is of particular relevance today if, as we propose above, the role of formal and informal NGOs and other citizen groups, both of the radical Left and Right, is of increasing importance. However, it is vital not to view counter-publicity in isolation from the public sphere more generally. Indeed, it may be that understanding the interactions between the two will further advance our understanding of the relationship between media representation and social change. The two spheres do of course overlap, a point made by Dahlgren (1994) in his discussion of the common domain and the advocacy domain. There are some opportunities in the public sphere (common domain) for citizens to perform an advocacy role. However, these opportunities are likely to be framed by the requirements of the mass medium. What is most interesting are the moments when counter-publicity breaks through into the common domain in its own right (rather than as decreed by corporately-controlled mass communications), providing the opportunity for ideological claims to be displaced, ruptured or contested. To understand fully the potential for counter-publicity to reach the common domain, we must first understand how it operates in the advocacy domain. To do this requires an understanding of the nature of civil society, where groups in the advocacy domain reside. Too often the public sphere is seen as interchangeable with civil society. Public communication can define a political community, but it does not in itself provide the conditions for social integration and may lead to greater fragmentation rather than greater intersubjectivity. While new media are clearly not solely responsible for the generation of counter-public spheres, through contributing to the destabilization of the public sphere and the generation of new forms of fragmentation and solidarity, they are central to this process that presents both opportunities and dangers to the theory and practice of democracy.

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