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The Internet and the Mobile Phone as Competing Metaphors

Introduction

"Mobile phones are changing politics faster than academics can follow" – this is the subtitle of an article published recently in *The Economist*.[1] Although it sounds a bit exaggerated, the subtitle correctly points out that, despite the fact that there are hardly any important political events today without mobile communication technologies being present in one way or the other, very little academic research has been done in this field. Even within the rapidly growing mobile literature political implications of mobile phones are rarely mentioned. Most of the books and articles with a focus on the social aspects of wireless communication technologies discuss at great length all sorts of aspects of mobiles in everyday life – from work to fashion.[2] Yet, it is difficult to find analyses that deal with events where mobile phones played key political roles from a theoretical point of view.[3] Although there are some important attempts that ask questions about the consequences of mobile use for democracy,[4] these questions are most-

[1] "Mobiles, Protests and Pundits: Mobile Phones Are Changing Politics Faster than Academics Can Follow", *The Economist*, 26 October 2006, http://www.economist.com/printedition/displayStory.cfm?story_id=8089676&fsrc=RSS.

[2] Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003; Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005; James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Leslie Haddon, *Information and Communication Technologies in Everyday Life: A Concise Introduction and Research Guide*, Oxford: Berg, 2004; Hazel Lahocee, Nina Wakeford and Ian Pearson, "A Social History of the Mobile Telephone with a View to Its Future", *BT Technology Journal*, vol. 21, no. 3. (July 2003); Rich Ling, *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*, San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2004.

[3] To my knowledge the first collection of studies in this field is Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self and Politics*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003.

[4] Gitte Stald, "Mobile Monitoring: Questions of Trust, Risk and Democratic Per-

ly concerned with low levels of political participation, (lack of) trust in social institutions, and unequal access to information. These are the very same questions sociologists, political scientists and media scholars have been struggling with regarding the internet's potential to revitalize the Habermasian public sphere. In the aforementioned analyses "the mobile phone" appears merely as a substitute for "the new internet", which makes it more difficult for the researcher to see the particularities of technological practices in various contexts. In the sections to follow I will focus on the important differences between the ways we tend to talk about the internet and mobile phones, and will argue that it is the latter that has the potential to bring us closer to the understanding of how "the public" works in the information age.

New Media and the Public Sphere

There is something deeply ironic about the fact that most analyses of the political implications of new media technologies consider the concept of the public sphere a useful (sometimes the only useful) point of departure despite the fact that Jürgen Habermas has very little to say about technology in his original work.[5] Since the publication of the English translation in 1989, the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has been criticised extensively on many grounds: some scholars questioned its historical accuracy, others found the normative framework problematic.[6] However, very few scholars point out the almost complete lack of reference to technologies in Habermas' accounts.[7] Up until a few months ago, soci-

spectives in Young Danes' Use of Mobile Phones", in Peter Dahlgren (ed.), *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democracy*, London: Routledge, 2007; Leopoldina Fortunati, "The Mobile Phone and Democracy: An Ambivalent Relationship", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy*; Rich Ling, "The Impact of the Mobile Telephone on Four Established Social Institutions", presented at the ISSEI2000 conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas, Bergen, Norway, 14–18 August 2000.

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.

[6] For an excellent collection of the historical criticisms see Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992. As far as the public sphere as a normative concept is concerned, several media theorists contend that although it is helpful in understanding the main characteristics of media change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the national level, the Habermasian approach is rather inadequate when it comes to addressing the challenges of globalization – see, for example, James Curran, *Media and Power*, London: Routledge, 2002; John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.

ologists, political scientists, and media and communication theorists could have only guessed and extrapolated what Habermas would have to say about the major technological changes that have been altering media landscapes all over the world.

In spring 2006 Habermas was awarded the Bruno Kreisky Prize for promoting human rights, and in his acceptance speech he gave a brief analysis of the relationship between new media technologies and public intellectual life. In his view, the internet "weakens the achievements of traditional media", since in the online environment "contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus".[8] In other words, instead of fulfilling the hopes of those concerned about declining participation and general political disengagement in most democratic societies, the internet contributes to the fragmentation of publics.[9]

This statement raises a number of interesting questions. What does the internet stand for in this speech? What are the contexts in which the internet allegedly fails to fulfil its political potential? Does this have any consequences on the ways we think about "the public" and political participation? Instead of looking for specific examples that could contradict or counterbalance the gloomy picture Habermas holds of the internet, I shall address these questions in a way that, hopefully, highlights some of the main assumptions behind his statement.

Internet as a Metaphor for a New Media Environment

Although the terms "information and communication technologies" and "new media" can refer to a wide range of communication technologies,[10] it is undoubtedly the internet that has received most of the scholarly (and general public) attention. Prestigious academic institutions, interdisciplinary research associations, international policy-making bodies have been established to deal with different aspects and implications of the in-

[7] Some important exceptions include Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993; Andrew Feenberg, "Modernity Theory and Technology Studies: Reflections on Bridging the Gap", in Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey and Andrew Feenberg (eds.), *Modernity and Technology*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

[8] The full speech was published in *Der Standard*, some excerpts in English are available on the *SignAndSight* website, http://www.signandsight.com/features/676.html.

[9] For more on the concept of fragmentation see Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

[10] For example, personal computers, video games, digital television, mobile phones, the internet, and so on, see Haddon, *op. cit.*

ternet.[11] Having said this, it may seem to be odd or even unfair to ask, what do we mean by the internet? What is that curious effect that Habermas was referring to in his speech?

By now, we all know the romantic history of the internet:[12] the strange encounter of university students and military strategists in the United States in the 1960s, the unexpected, independent innovations (such as the World Wide Web), the burst of the "dot.com bubble", and now the debated revolutionary impact of Web 2.0. Still, when it comes to academic discussions, it is quite difficult to define what the internet exactly stands for.[13] Is it a network of connected computers? Or, a network of connected computers *and* people? Are mice, keyboards, printers and monitors parts of it? Where are the boundaries of this network? Is it a collection of websites? Or, a collection of websites, newsletters, and e-mails? And how does this network change? Is the "thing" we call the internet different from what it was five years ago? And is it different from what it will look like in five years? If yes, in what ways?

We could go on asking questions like these for ever, and it may be argued that it is not a particularly useful exercise if we are to say anything about the roles the internet plays or might play in various political settings. In order to overcome the confusion around competing definitions, let me propose to treat the internet, at least for now, not as a difficult-to-define object, but as a metaphor. This idea is not new, John Urry, for example considers the internet to be the metaphor for "the social life as fluid".[14] In the Habermas speech, however, the internet stands for something else. With the line he draws between traditional media and the internet, Habermas makes the latter to become a *metaphor for the entire new media environment*. The internet, in this sense, represents the new TV, the new radio and the new press, all in one. Media theorists and media historians would probably have little against this categorization, although they would surely draw attention to the crucial technological differences between the different types of media.[15]

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[11] Such as the Oxford Internet Institute, the Association of Internet Researchers, UN World Internet Governance Forum, to name just a few.

[12] Some of the most often cited sources include Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993.

[13] See the thread under the title "A definition of the internet" in the archives of the AoIR e-mail list, http://listserv.aoir.org/pipermail/air-l-aoir.org/2006-October/011286.html.

[14] John Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 40–41.

As Urry argues, there are differences in the productivity of metaphors; some are better than others, and even good ones might loose their appeal as circumstances change. I find the internet as a metaphor for "the new media environment" problematic from at least two aspects. First, it generally fails to acknowledge that old and new media technologies not only co-exist, but also overlap and influence each other in various exciting ways. When Habermas talks about the internet and its role in creating dispersed publics, he ignores the fact that online and print versions of exactly those newspapers that are supposed to serve as the bastions of rational debates are inextricably linked together (and to other media); that television news programmes are accessible via various websites and often the same news programmes get important information and questions in real time via e-mails from journalists and viewers; and that community radio stations in many places could simply not survive without going online or relying heavily on digital technologies. The internet is interesting not simply because it is the next stage in the media evolution (and thus makes the lives of traditional media more difficult), but because it offers an opportunity to re-think the applicability and usefulness of such classical categories as "audiences", "content producers", "publics", etc. This element, unfortunately, is completely missing form the current use of the internet metaphor.

The second problem follows from the first one: the metaphor is misleading as it does not take into account that all communication within the "new media environment" takes place in a material world[16] inhabited not only by humans and a number of media technologies, but also by all sorts of objects (including towers, texts, trees, and so on). One curious element of the "dispersed public" argument is that it assumes people have greater anonymity online than in real life. The assumption, however, seems to be wrong – not necessarily because of all those "web robots" that collect bits of information about us and our online activities, but, more importantly, because during "being online" we are also present (and our activities are being shaped) in real spaces, where we are constantly parts of a number of communities.[17] And, as Karin Knorr-Cetina, among others,

[15] See, for example, Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet*, Cambridge: Polity, 2002.

[16] Saskia Sassen makes a similar point when she talks about the embeddedness of digital technologies, see her "Towards a Sociology of Information Technology", *Current Sociology*, vol. 50, no. 3 (May 2002). See also Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Oxford: Berg, 2000.

[17] Nina Wakeford, "Pushing at the Boundaries of New Media Studies", *New Media & Society*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2004). On issues related to virtual field sites see the special issue

convincingly argues, it is actually impossible to conceive what a community is in contemporary societies without reckoning with objects that make our worlds. As she put it, object-centred environments "situate and stabilize selves, define individual identity just as much as communities and families used to do, and … promote forms of sociality (social forms of binding self and other) that feed on and supplement the human forms of sociality studied by social scientists".[18] This component is also completely absent from the Habermasian understanding of the internet.

Mobile Phones: "Connecting People" … and Objects … and Worlds

The main risk of studying the political roles of new media as they appear in the Habermas speech is that it actually becomes very easy to end up in a position where one has to explain why there are so few interesting things happening in "cyberspace".[19] As I have argued elsewhere,[20] this disillusionment happens usually not because there is nothing exciting about the political uses of new media technologies, but because we are rarely approaching these phenomena from the right angle. There are remarkable and surprising events every single year in many different countries that clearly show how innovative uses of various communication technologies (both old and new) make politicians, their advisers, and academics re-think what they know about political communication. Yet, these cases seem to be very difficult to deal with if we have to rely on the Habermasian apparatus. We need to look for a better metaphor for the new media environment; one which makes it easier to identify the important changes that happen in various political settings.

This is the point where I wish to return to the issue of mobile communications. The first time mobile phones played a significant role in a political context was almost six years ago, in January 2001 in Manila, when mass demonstrations organized after his televised impeachment trial via text messages (SMS) led to the downfall of Joseph Estrada, the

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of the *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 43, no. 3 (November/December 1999), edited by Peter Lyman and Nina Wakeford.

[18] Karin Knorr-Cetina, "Sociality with Objects: Social Relations in Postsocial Knowledge Societies", *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1997), p. 1.

[19] An often cited work that illustrates this point perfectly is Michael Margolis and David Resnick, *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace "Revolution"*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000.

[20] Endre Dányi and Anna Galácz, "Internet and Elections: Changing Political Strategies and Citizen Tactics in Hungary", *Information Polity* 10 (2005), pp. 219–232.

13th President of the Philippines.[21] Since then similar patterns of political mobilization occurred in many other countries, though in different circumstances. In 2002 rumours, jokes and propaganda messages sent in SMS and e-mails had important and immediate political consequences in the general election campaigns in Hungary,[22] Kenya,[23] and in the presidential election in South Korea;[24] mass protests organised over mobile phones against the Spanish government after the 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid, just a few days before general elections, resulted in the defeat of prime minister Aznar;[25] young people from the outskirts of Paris used text messages to co-ordinate their actions against the police during the 2005 riots in France; and in the same year anti-Japanese protesters in China used internet bulletin boards and mobile phones to organize marches in Beijing.[26]

The most exciting element, I wish to emphasize, in these cases is that it was *never the mobile phones alone* that were responsible for the political situation. It is apparent that in the fall of President Estrada the televised impeachment trial had just as important a role as mobile phones and the physical square in which angry Philippine citizens gathered to express their disappointment. Similarly, pictures of burning cars in the outskirts of Paris – captured and distributed by camera phones – are parts of the story just as much as tear gas and water cannons. In other words, these cases are fascinating not because they tell us something about the future

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[21] Fernando Paragas, "Drama*text*ism: Mobile Telephony and People Power in the Philippines", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy*, pp. 259–283.

[22] Endre Dányi and Miklós Sükösd, "M-Politics in the Making: SMS and E-Mail in the 2002 Hungarian Election Campaign", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Communication*, pp. 211–232.

[23] Isaack Okero Otieno, "Mobile Telephony and Democratic Struggles: A Case of 2002 Elections in Kenya", paper prepared for the *RE:activism: Re-drawing the boundaries of activism in a new media environment* conference, Budapest, 14–15 October 2005, http://mokk.bme.hu/centre/conferences/FP/fpOtieno.

[24] Shin Dong Kim, "The Shaping of New Politics in the Era of Mobile and Cyber Communication: The Internet, Mobile Phone and Political Participation in Korea", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.) *Mobile Democracy*, pp. 285–315; Manuel Castells, Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol, Jack Linchuan Qiu and Araba Sey, *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

[25] Castells et al., *op. cit.*; Endre Dányi, "WLCM 2 UROP: Interconnected Public Spheres in the Age of Mobile Communication", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place*, pp. 129–137.

[26] Castells et al., *op. cit.*; Robert Ness, "The Chinese Smart Mob: Opportunities for Sinopreneurs", *The China Venture*, 3 October 2006, http://thechinaventure.com/?p=14.

of political participation, but primarily because they make visible how the political worlds, in which objects, people, images and ideas temporarily come together, are created.

This is a very different way of thinking about the political roles of new media technologies. Habermas divides and separates, whereas all one sees in the aforementioned cases is connections. Therefore, as Carolyn Marvin brilliantly argues, we should be able to think of new media as "the use of new communication technology for old or new purposes, new ways of using old technologies, and, in principle, all other possibilities for the exchange of social meaning".[27] The mobile phone is an excellent metaphor for this kind of new media environment. But how can we relate this to such classical concepts as "the public" or political participation?

Discussion: Where to Turn after the Cultural Turn?

In a recent article, Peter Dahlgren conceptualizes the public sphere by concentrating on three dimensions: structures, representation and interaction.[28] The first two dimensions are well known from the classical Habermasian concept: structures are mainly about different institutions and legal frameworks regulating communication, whereas the second practically refers to different forms of media content. It is interaction, the third dimension that is the particularly relevant element in the model. Dahlgren argues that we cannot talk about "a public" without interaction between citizens and the media, and amongst citizens themselves:

> it is imperative not to lose sight of the classic idea that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other. This is certainly the basic premise of those versions of democratic theory that see deliberation as fundamental.[29]

The formal deliberative model, however, has been fiercely criticised for being too rationalistic.[30] To overcome the limitations of the original model,

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[27] Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 8.

[28] Peter Dahlgren, "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication", *Political Communication*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2005), pp. 147–162.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 149.

[30] To refer back to the introduction of this paper, Habermas is unhappy about the role the internet plays in politics simply because it does not serve well the ultimate cause: rational deliberation!

Dahlgren introduces the term "civic culture", which is mostly concerned with the cultural factors that influence the nature of political participation in a given setting. He calls for a "cultural turn" in the way we think about citizenship,[31] which then enables us to see how people *become* citizens. This model does not take the distinction between politics and non-politics for granted, instead, it is interested in what "doing citizenship" means.

I find the concept of "civic cultures" appealing, since it paints much more a realistic picture of how people get engaged with politics. Dahlgren finds the formal deliberative democracy model too rigid, so what he offers is a concept of the public sphere "with a human face". He is interested in a more flexible understanding of deliberation, or *discussion*, as he prefers to refer to the consensus seeking communicative processes. But in this model it is always exclusively humans who can participate in discussions; "things", technologies and their different uses remain barely visible in the background. No matter whether we are talking about a computer connected to the internet, a mobile phone or a microphone, these "political objects" appear to be unproblematic – all citizens need to use them is to follow the "logic of the media", or, as Phil Agre put it, acquire the necessary social skills.[32]

However, as the mobile phone as a metaphor showed us earlier, there is no such thing as a predefined set of uses for each technology: Nokia, Siemens and Motorola users' manuals do not have a separate section on "how to organize mass demonstrations within two hours". If we accept, as Chantal Mouffe convincingly asserts, that "every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power",[33] then we have to ask not only how the consensus was reached among citizens, but also *how the power becomes stabilized?*

Taking John Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism[34] as a starting point (and echoing Mouffe's point mentioned above), Monique Girard and David Stark offer a very exciting way of looking at public discussions without excluding all those technologies that are partly responsible for mak-

[31] Peter Dahlgren, "Doing Citizenship: The Cultural Origins of Civic Agency in the Public Sphere", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2006), pp. 267–286.

[32] Phil Agre, "The Practical Republic: Social Skills and the Progress of Citizenship", in Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney (eds.), *Community in the Digital Age*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

[33] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2000, p. 104.

[34] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Athens, OH: Swallow Press / Ohio University Press, 1927/1991.

ing the discussions happen in the first place. Instead of "the public" they think about

> public spaces of collective sense-making. Public space is not a sphere and it is not homogeneous… Instead, it is a heterogeneous space, populated by very different kinds of actors who come into being and through their interactions create the many dimensions of the space itself… We develop a notion of publics as distinctive combinations of social networks, protocols and technologies.[35]

What the mobile phone as the metaphor for the new media environment shows is exactly how these spaces, or, as Bruno Latour refers to them, assemblies[36] are born. The "cultural turn" in the way we think about citizenship is a good and necessary one, but unless it acknowledges the presence of objects and other non-human actors and lets them enter the discussions, it will leave us talking about the internet (and mobile communication technologies) the same way as Habermas did in March 2006.[37]

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[35] Monique Girard and David Stark, "Socio-Technologies of Assembly: Sense-Making and Demonstration in Rebuilding Lower Manhattan", in David Lazer and Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger (eds.), *Governance and Information: The Rewiring of Governing and Deliberation in the 21st Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

[36] Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public", in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press / Karlsruhe, Germany: Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, 2005.

[37] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the "Technology and the Public Sphere" doctoral course in Bergen, Norway, 14–18 November 2006. I am grateful to the organizers and participants of the course for their helpful comments and suggestions.