The Internet, deliberative democracy, and power: Radicalizing the public sphere

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The Internet, deliberative democracy, and power: Radicalizing the public sphere

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Abstract

Deliberative democratic public sphere theory has become increasingly popular in Internet-democracy research and commentary. In terms of informal civic practices, advocates of this theory see the Internet as a means for the expansion of citizen deliberation leading to the formation of rational public opinion through which official decision makers can be held accountable. In this paper I question this public sphere conception as a democratic norm of Internet practice given that there have been sustained critiques of the deliberative conception for failing to account fully for power, and thus for supporting status quo social and political systems. I examine these claims and argue that while the deliberative conception actually pays more attention to power than some critics argue, it fails to adequately theorize the power relations involved in defining what counts as legitimate deliberation. Drawing upon post-Marxist discourse theory, I highlight two inter-related factors that are largely ignored in this boundary setting: discursive radicalism and inter-discursive conflict. I argue that to fully account for these two factors we can refer to an agonistic public sphere position that is also being drawn upon in Internet-democracy research and commentary. In particular, the concept 'counter-publics', which is deployed in such work, helps us take into account the democratic role of radical exclusion and associated counter-discursive struggles over the limits of legitimate deliberation. The result is the radicalization of the public sphere conception.

Keywords

agonistic
counter-public
deliberation
democracy
discourse
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public sphere

Introduction[1]

Over the past decade there have been many Internet-democracy visions and experiments drawing upon and developing various understandings of what democratic politics means. Three democratic models have become particularly prominent in Internet-democracy rhetoric and practice. First, a liberal individualist model, which sees the Internet as assisting the expression of individual interests by providing private citizens with the means to access a plethora of political information and express their views directly to elected representatives. This model is hegemonic within government policy making, commercial e-democracy initiatives, and much social science research. However, it does not go unchallenged. A communitarian model has been promoted by community media activists in direct opposition to the individualist ethos of the first model. The communitarian position stresses the possibility of Internet-based groups and networks funding and enhancing communal spirit and values. In contrast to these first two

2. Deliberative democrats sometimes describe their model as 'radical'. However, here I use the adjective 'strong' to represent their position so that 'radical' can be reserved for democratic theorizing and practice based on an understanding of radical exclusion. 'Strong democracy' is drawn from the work of Benjamin Barber (1984, 1998), who distinguishes deliberative democracy as 'strong' in contrast to libertarian and communitarian forms of democracy.

positions, a deliberative model has become prominent within academic and civil society e-democracy circles. This model posits the Internet as the means for an expansion of a public sphere of citizen deliberation leading to rational public opinion that can hold official decision makers accountable. As such, this third model claims to advance 'strong' democracy in relation to the former two positions.[2]

In this paper I am interested in this third model given its 'strong' democratic claim. In particular, I focus on the concept of the public sphere that deliberative democrats see as central to achieving strong democracy. I begin by outlining the deliberative public sphere conception through comparison with the liberal-individualist and communitarian positions. In relation to these positions, I show that the deliberative public sphere is indeed strongly democratic as it promotes public sovereignty, which refers to the rule by not just some aggregate conception of 'the people', but by the inter-subjectively produced 'public' reasons of those affected by particular issues.

Deliberative commentators and researchers argue that the Internet potentially facilitates this public sphere but a range of socio-cultural obstacles are currently limiting this potential. However, my aim here is not to empirically inquire into the extent and quality of deliberation taking place online, or what is being done to encourage it. Such work is being undertaken elsewhere. Rather, my interest is in the claim that the deliberative public sphere conception, as drawn upon by many Internet researchers and commentators, offers the basis of a strong model of democracy. I am specifically concerned with the sustained critiques of the deliberative public sphere for failing to account fully for power, and subsequently for supporting status quo social and political systems of inequality and domination. I examine these claims and find that, although the deliberative conception actually pays more attention to power than some critics argue, it fails to adequately theorize the power relations involved in the framing of any deliberation. Drawing on a post-Marxist conception of discourse, I highlight two inter-related factors that are largely ignored in this boundary setting: discursive radicalism and inter-discursive contestation.

However, rather than discard the public sphere conception at this point, as some Internet-democratic commentators propose is necessary, I aim to develop it to account for the two overlooked factors. To do so, I turn to another understanding of the public sphere that is being drawn upon and extended in Internet-democracy work. I call this understanding 'agonistic' because it sees cyberspace as a space of struggle, supporting both the reproduction of dominant social relations and their contestation by excluded groups. The key concept provided by this agonistic position is 'counter-publics', which enables the articulation of the deliberative public sphere and the post-Marxist understanding of discourse. Through this articulation I am able to develop a radicalized public sphere conception; radicalized because it extends the deliberative conception to account for the democratic role of radical exclusion and corresponding inter-discursive contestation.

The deliberative public sphere conception

Many Internet-democracy commentators, researchers and practitioners (and even a number of policy makers), draw upon and advocate a deliberative

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public sphere as the ideal for citizen participation in politics, where rational debate or argumentation between citizens over common problems leads to critically informed public opinion that can guide and scrutinize official decision making processes (see, Benson 1996; Bohman 2004; Clift 2003; Davis 1999; Fang 1995; Fung and Kedl 2000; Gimmler 2001; Noveck 2000; Schneider 1997; Sunstein 2001; Tanner 2001; Wilhelm 2000). In relation to the Internet, these deliberative public sphere advocates are interested in the extent and quality of argumentation being facilitated online, particularly given claims that the Internet's two-way, relatively low cost, semi-decentralized[3] and global communications, combined with evolving interactive software and moderation techniques, offer the ideal basis (particularly when compared to the mass media) for rational deliberation.

The definition and criteria of rational deliberation used in discussing and evaluating the extent and quality of publicly-oriented online (as well as offline) communication varies somewhat because commentators and researchers draw upon different readings of a variety of deliberative democratic theories.[4] However, a general public sphere norm can be identified. This norm involves rational-critical deliberation over disputed validity claims, aimed at reaching understanding and agreement. This rational-critical communication is ideally *inclusive* (formally); *free* (non-coercive, including autonomy from state and corporate interests); *equal* (communicatively); *sincere* (as far as this is possible), *respectful* (putting oneself in the position of the other); *reasoned* (framing arguments in terms of why particular claims *ought* to be accepted) and *reflexive* (identity re-constituting).[5] It is important to note that here 'public' refers to the form and not a particular content or place of communication: the public sphere comes into existence whenever people engage in argumentation over problematized validity claims. Needless to say, certain social institutions encourage this type of communication more than others. However, the deliberative public sphere itself is not an institution but a space constituted by rational communication.

Deliberative democrats claim this public sphere conception provides the basis for 'strong' democracy. This strength is clear in relation to the other two most popular models of democracy drawn upon in Internet discussion and practice: liberal individualism and communitarianism.[6] Both liberal individualist and communitarian models posit a *fixed* and *private* (pre-deliberative) political subject: on the one hand, the self-knowing and self-interested rational ego; on the other hand, the undifferentiated communal subject bound by an ethically integrated community. As such, both require and put forward at best weak public sphere conceptions. Democracy is either equated with strategic competition between pre-determined interests or subsumed within the ethically integrated community. Liberal-individualism's public sphere is simply a 'market place of ideas', a consumer model of politics where 'citizens' act as self-interested and instrumentally rational utility maximizers, finding information about personal issues and problems, and then taking action to solve their problems or satisfy their needs by making choices from, or making demands of, an array of competing political options. The communitarian public sphere is

3. Semi-decentralized here indicates that some systems are more dependent on central distribution points (e.g. e-mail and web servers) than others (e.g. peer-to-peer file sharing systems like Gnutella).

4. The most popular starting point for Internet-deliberative researchers has been Habermas (1984, 1989, 1996). This is not surprising given that Habermas offers arguably the most sophisticated theory of the deliberative public sphere. Other deliberative public sphere theory drawn upon by Internet commentators and researchers include Barber (1984), Bohman (1996), Fishkin (1991), and Gutman and Thompson (1996).

5. See Dahlberg (2004c) for an explication of these criteria from Habermas' theory.

6. See Dahlberg (2001a) for a discussion of the liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative positions as they have developed in relation to Internet practices. See Habermas (1996) for a persuasive argument on the superiority of the deliberative position over liberalism and communitarianism (in republican form).

7. Here I am referring to a stylized Internet-communitarian position. Sophisticated communitarians do not see community norms as beyond challenge. As Lee Salter emphasized when commenting on an earlier version of this paper, communitarians do *not* generally wish to unreservedly conserve norms. Rather, they recognize (against liberals like Rawls) that, first, such norms are the unavoidable starting point and second, that traditions inform discussion; 'traditions in this sense referring to a form of collective memory and embodiment of what is good and therefore worth preserving'. Still, reference to tradition and community values remains the basis of good governance for communitarians. As such, communitarianism offers a conservative model of political engagement when contrasted to the deliberative democratic emphasis on the public sphere as a space constituted by the rational critique and transformation of taken-for-granted validity claims and norms.

8. For the operationalization of the criteria of the deliberative public sphere in Internet research, see Dahlberg (2004c), Graham (2002), Janssen and Kies (2005), Schneider (1996) and Wilhelm (2000).

subsumed within, and undifferentiated from, the lifeworld of the community; community discussions of political disputes defer to shared and taken-for-granted norms.[7]

Both of these public sphere conceptions fail to ensure or facilitate public sovereignty. Both allow for the domination of politics by private power: the shaping of individual desires (through political or market publicity) or community norms (by invoking tradition, religion, patriarchal values, etc) by powerful interests. In contrast, public sovereignty is central to the deliberative democratic public sphere. Like both liberal-individualist and communitarians, deliberative democrats begin by emphasizing respect for difference. However, they do not fall into a fragmented pluralism of fixed differences (individual or community) that leads to the acceptance of either competitively based aggregation systems or irreducible community identities. The emphasis on respect for diversity is complemented by an equal emphasis on the necessity for strong democracy of a public sphere of rational-critical deliberation. This deliberation is an inter-subjective performative process that involves the transformation of privately-oriented selves into publicly-oriented 'citizens', and pre-deliberative positions into critical-reflexive public opinions. This rational performative process provides the basis for public sovereignty: public rationality and opinions are produced through deliberation, coalescing in rational public opinion that enables the critical scrutiny and democratic oversight of formal decision-making processes. This is in contrast to reason being centred in the pre-discursive self or community, and sovereignty being based on an aggregation of private positions or on a homogeneous identity.

It follows then that deliberative public sphere commentary and research focuses on the extent and quality of rational deliberation, as variously operationalized,[8] being fostered through communicative spaces. Deliberative democrats then try to identify the factors that facilitate and retard argumentation, with the aim of finding ways to further extend it. Deliberation is seen as dependent upon: the social, cultural and political positioning of participants, the form of mediation deployed, the distribution of social, cultural and economic capital relevant to supporting rational communication and the degree of autonomy of citizen interaction from the instrumentalizing influence of state and economic systems.

As indicated earlier, the Internet is of great interest to deliberative democrats because it offers two-way, relatively low cost, semi-decentralized, and trans-national communication through which government and corporate power may (in principle) be bypassed and rational-critical deliberation fostered. This interest has led to a growing body of Internet-deliberative democracy research. There has already been considerable evaluation of online interactive spaces in relation to deliberative public sphere criteria (for example, Dahlberg 2001b; Fang 1995; Graham 2002; Janssen and Kies 2005; Oblak 2001; Schneider 1997; Wilhelm 2000). Some research has been, and is being, undertaken through the development of initiatives and experiments attempting to facilitate online deliberation.[9] The aim of these projects is to develop technologies and moderation systems for facilitating online deliberation and rational public opinion formation, in the understanding that the Internet is a malleable technology

that can be shaped to support various forms of social interaction. There is also significant concern about the way in which the wider social, political and cultural context of Internet development and use structures online deliberation. This concern has prompted contextual research on the impact upon online deliberation of digital divides, communicative competencies, consumer uses, interest group practices, corporate ownership and control, Internet management systems and government intervention (for example, Dahlberg 2001b, 2004a, 2005b; Fung and Kedl 2000; Muhlberger 2005; Salter 2003, 2004; Tanner 2001; Wilhelm 2000).

This research has lead to cautious conclusions about the Internet facilitating deliberative democracy. While specific sites and experiments have been shown to foster deliberation, the social context of the Internet's development and use is driving online politics towards pluralist interest group competition and individualist participation. The general feeling is that, as things stand, the future of Internet politics will not be the strong democracy of the deliberative model but 'politics as usual': ideological distortion and coercion, partisan rhetoric, dogmatic enclaves, activist disruptions and destabilizing conflict (Clift 2003; Davis 1998; Hill and Hughes 1998; Resnick and Margolis 2000; Sunstein 2001; Wilhelm 2000).

The alternative that deliberative democrats advocate to this colonization of online politics by interest group competition is for universities, civic organizations and governments to develop online deliberative public spaces, and for government policy initiatives that limit state and corporate colonization of online politics while encouraging citizen deliberation. This seems to all make good sense. However, before advancing such initiatives we need to examine critiques of the deliberative public sphere that argue that it fails as a model of strong democracy, and that any deliberative projects at best support weak democratic practices.

The deliberative conception and power

The public sphere conception, as advocated by Internet-deliberative democracy commentators, may be read as strongly democratic in its focus upon both respect for difference and public sovereignty. Moreover, by defining the public sphere as based on the form rather than the content of communication, deliberative democrats avoid pre-defining 'public' and 'private' contents, answering to some of the concerns raised by (mostly feminist) critics about the public/private division.[10] It is still assumed that any democratic society will operate a division between public and private affairs; that for free and healthy social life there needs to be space for instrumental reproduction, intimacy and socialization, autonomous from exposure to generalized rational-critical scrutiny. This means that some topics and places of conversation will be understood as private – deemed off-limits to critical scrutiny. Yet, what these issues and places are is not fixed but determined through deliberation – there are no contents or spaces that are essentially either public or private.

However, this deliberative public sphere conception has been challenged in relation to its strong democratic claims on a number of counts. The strongest critique is that the rational-critical communicative basis of the deliberative public sphere delivers an overly rationalist conception

9. See, for example, the research of Civic Exchange Strong Democracy in Cyberspace http://islandia.law.yale.edu/isp/backup%2010-2003/strongdem/overview.html; Community Connections http://communityconnections.heinz.cmu.edu/about/index.jsp; Heng and de Moor's (2003) Group Report Authoring System; Weblab.org; and Bodies Electric http://www.unchat.com/ (unless otherwise stated, all URLs and Web sites referred to in this paper were last accessed on 10 December 2005).

10. Some of the more complex critiques of the public/private dichotomy include Benhabib (1992), Fraser (1992, 1997), Phillips (1997), and Young (1990). These theorists do not argue, as some earlier feminists have, that we should discard this binary altogether. All agree that the public/private distinction must be retained in some form. As Philips asserts, 'we might want to say that everything is political, but this does not commit us to the view that there is no difference between private and public life'. See Philips (1997: 149). The problem for all these theorists is where to draw the line between public and private and who should have the power to do the drawing. See, in particular, Benhabib (1996a: 18), Fraser (1997), and Young (1990: 119–20).

11. Other (weaker) critiques of deliberative democracy are dealt with elsewhere. See, for example, Benhabib (1996b), Bohman (1996), Chambers (1996), Dryzek (2000) and Habermas (1996).

12. Some deliberative democrats, including Internet-deliberative researchers and commentators, fail to account for wider contextual power relations influencing deliberations (often due to an all too close analysis of micro-processes of deliberation). Much research and related commentary simply posits a few criteria of rational communication and then 'measures' if these are met (for examples, see Dahlberg 2004b).

which, despite claims that it makes room for difference and produces public sovereignty, fails to adequately theorize the power relations in deliberation, leading to support for status quo exclusions and domination (Mansbridge 1996; Mouffe 2000; Villa 1992; Young 1996, 2000).[11] The question of how the deliberative conception deals with power needs close examination and will be my focus in this section.

At the start, it is important not to under-estimate the extent that the deliberative model does in fact theorize for power. Deliberative democracy understands power to operate in both positive (enabling) and negative (constraining) ways. The deliberative model theorizes and promotes the positive power of communication: the 'force' of the better argument in the transformation of private subjects into critical-reflexive citizens and in the rational resolution of disputes (Habermas 1984: 25). In contrast to this positive power of argumentation, the deliberative model theorizes the positive power of instrumental rationality. For instance, the power the consumer has when making rational calculations of the best choices in relation to satisfying individual needs and desires. Or, the power that clients of administrative systems have when making use of governmental services. The deliberative democrat would argue that such power and resulting action is all and good in its 'proper place', but that it undermines democratic sovereignty when it replaces argumentation in political decision making; for instance, when 'experts' make cost-benefit calculations on moral-practical questions without community consultation and debate. The deliberative democrat is also very concerned about *negative* power limiting rational communication: for instance, direct coercion (such as identity-based discrimination or state and corporate and surveillance); or the constraints placed on some actors to fully participate in argumentation due to their lack of social, cultural and economic capital. Yet the deliberative model must itself draw on a sense of negative power in order to block some forms of positive and negative power: the deliberative model must rule against instrumental rationality and coercion.

Hence, deliberative democrats call for the design and development of communicative spaces that will facilitate argumentation and exclude both instrumental rationality and direct blockages to rational communication. In relation to the Internet, as outlined in the previous section, many deliberative democrats are interested in how to design online spaces to foster deliberation, experimenting with rules, technologies and moderation systems. Others, as also seen in the previous section, focus at a broader contextual level upon how to provide for more equal distribution of communicative skills and resources and the protection of online communicative spaces from state and corporate control and surveillance.[12]

However, by formulating the public sphere in terms of a normative conception of deliberation that draws a line between forms of communication that are designated rational-democratic and irrational-undemocratic, deliberative democrats have been strongly criticized for promoting the very things they claim to avoid. Drawing upon Foucault in particular and, poststructuralism in general, some critics see the deliberative public sphere as leading to coercion and exclusion (Dean 1996; Mouffe 2000; Rabinovitch 2001; Villa 1992; Young 2000). These critics argue that deliberative democracy does not deal with the normalizing (coercion) and exclusion involved in the

designation of a *particular* form of communication as *the* rational and democratically legitimate norm. In order to be considered legitimate deliberators, subjects must come to internalize the rules of the particular form of communication deemed democratically valid or be excluded from the public sphere. Moreover, some participants are advantaged over others, as some participants' 'naturalized' modes of communication (often Western, masculine modes) are closer to the legitimate normative mode than others. That is, in order not to be excluded, some voices must be more normalized and disciplined into fitting the deliberative mode than others. In any event, exclusion can never be totally avoided because normalization is achieved through the exclusion (or repression) of modes of communication deemed illegitimate (irrational, non-democratic, private, etc.) and which are associated with some participants more than others.

In order to explore the deliberative public sphere conception in relation to this critique it is important to put forward a sophisticated deliberative position. To critique a weak stylization may be a useful strategy for discrediting the position under attack and for highlighting the strengths of the critic's argument, but finding faults in a sophisticated position advances theory further. To put forward a sophisticated deliberative democratic position I will draw from Habermasian theory, which Internet-deliberative democracy commentators often deploy.

The sophisticated deliberative theorist argues first that anyone who supports any form of democracy, as critics of the deliberative public sphere generally do, always already makes a normative claim to what democracy is and is not, including what the acceptable mode of democratic communication is and is not. Deliberative democrats simply attempt to make their normative claims explicit, claims about rational-critical communication that they believe are in fact presupposed in their critics arguments. Second, the sophisticated deliberative theorist agrees that the institution of any norm will encourage the constitution of subjects in certain ways. But they also argue that norms can be more or less normalizing and oppressive, more or less freedom enhancing and democratic, and that a deliberative public sphere norm encourages democracy rather than coercion. The requirements of rational-critical debate operate at a procedural level, that while obviously not being value free, allow for a wide variation in communicative styles and voices. Rather than normalizing subjects in relation to a very specific type of communication, the requirements of the public sphere are developed so as to maximize inclusion and autonomy by demanding respect for difference and critical reflection on domination (only 'non-democratic' elements must be repressed and excluded).[13] However, and third, the sophisticated deliberative theorist admits that any norm is also hypothetical: fallible and revisable. That is, the public sphere formulation of deliberation is an *idealization*, an ideal drawn from everyday practice through theoretical-practical argumentation (compared with metaphysically) and as such is open to ongoing challenge and revision on the basis of practical 'evidence' (challenge and revision that the above critiques and this very paper contribute to). It is also important to note that this argument and evidence is itself situated, and so fallibility is limited or related to a particular social-cultural context rather than being a disembedded, value-free

13. See Dahlberg (2005a) for further discussion of how the Habermasian public sphere of communicative rationality may be read so as to maximize for diversity.

process – that is, the public sphere has the status of an idealization rather than a metaphysical ideal or scientific fact. This dynamic of ongoing revision explains and makes acceptable variations in the specific deliberative idealizations that different theorists develop. Finally, and of most importance to the rest of this paper, the sophisticated deliberative democrat not only accepts that democratic norms will necessarily require the 'legitimate' exclusion of 'undemocratic' elements from deliberation, but they also admit that in actual practice there will always be 'illegitimate' exclusions and associated failures of rational communication because there will always be (at least) residual levels of (i) instrumental power, (ii) socio-cultural inequality and (iii) coercion. For instance, where (i) communication is colonized by technical or market calculations, displacing critical voices and moral-practical questioning; or where (ii) communicative resource inequalities lead to exclusion or marginalization; or where (iii) explicit threats, bribes or violence leads to exclusion of certain voices from debate.

In summary then, the sophisticated deliberative democrat emphasizes the importance of the public sphere idealization of argumentation while agreeing to its revisability and accepting that exclusions always result from everyday communicative practice. However, the political consequences and democratic role of the excluded elements are not theorized. Moreover, exclusion will occur even if the formal rules of rational-critical communication were able to be followed, due to the power of *embedded* or *sedimented* meaning(s) – in other words, the force afforded to certain positions, reasons, identities and arguments due to cultural conventions, myths and ideologies. In fact, all communicative exclusions, whether explicitly identified (as in instrumental reasoning, communicative inequalities and coercion) or not, are structured by such cultural forces, given that all communication is based on taken-for-granted, value laden meanings.

To more fully understand the forces and associated social relations involved here we can turn to the concept of discourse, as conceived in post-Marxist discourse theory. Discourse here refers to socially contingent, value laden and taken-for-granted systems of meaning, which frame all understandings, identities and practices, including deliberative reasoning and resulting public opinion (Howarth 2000; Laclau 1993; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). By drawing upon this understanding, two overlapping aspects of discursive power can be identified as needing to be taken into account in the public sphere idealization: discursive radicalism and inter-discursive contestation.

First, all framing of meaning and associated social relations, including what it means to be rational and democratic, necessarily involves exclusion. The inclusion/exclusion relation is central to the logic of discourse, even democratic discourse (Mouffe 2000: 48, 49). Exclusion operates as a 'radical outside', because it is that which *is not* normal or legitimate. As such, exclusion enables common identification, as normal and legitimate, of the set of meanings, practices, identities and social relations that make up a particular discourse. The elements of this outside cannot be understood within the said discourse in a positive sense or they could not function as the radical other against which identification can take place. So the outside must be represented as radically empty, identified simply as what is 'extreme', 'unreasonable', 'irrational', that radical Other which cannot be given its own

voice. This means that the outside also points to the radical failure of any discourse – there is always something that remains unexplained. Thus, the outside (or discursive radicalism) points to the dislocation of the social – the impossibility of closure of all discursive systems. As such, the outside is always on the inside in the sense of representing a 'lack' within the system. The discursive radicalism then represents a systemic antagonism blocking the suturing of meaning, including the defining of 'legitimate' public sphere boundaries, and points to the possibility for successful contestation and re-articulation of discourse. This then leads to the second 'factor' that needs to be more fully taken into account in the public sphere: inter-discursive contestation.

The always-existing relation between inside and outside involves a struggle to discursively fix meaning within any social order, including fixing the boundaries of 'legitimate' public sphere deliberation. In other words, it involves a struggle for cultural domination. This struggle takes place between those (dominant) discourses that have achieved (at any one time) authoritative status, and subordinate discourses constituted by excluded elements that are marginalized or even silenced in mainstream (structured by dominant discourses) communicative arenas. However, under the 'right' socio-political conditions – when dislocations surface and hence social crises occur – contestation may be translated into effective transformation of discursive structures. Dominant discursive forces work continually and with all means available to maintain exclusions so as to preserve discursive stability. Status-quo understandings of social reality (including the definition of legitimate debate) are shored up via a whole range of social agents, resources and processes, from socio-cultural institutions propagating common sense understandings of 'the world' to the explicit use of law and coercive state apparatuses by proponents of dominant discourses to marginalize and silence opponents – indicating again the discursive framing of all exclusion, whether explicit or not.

Deliberative theory offers a procedural conception of public communication that not only makes room for variation in actual practices but also sees argumentation as drawing from a lifeworld of taken-for-granted meanings – as based on private individuals coming together as a public. However, the procedural norm fails to take into account discursive radicalism and inter-discursive contestation. As such, the problem is not that the deliberative public sphere excludes and normalizes but that it does not adequately deal with normalization, exclusion and associated cultural power struggles.

Despite this failure, the answer is not to discard the public sphere deliberative conception but to expand and radicalize it to take into account discursive radicalism and inter-discursive contestation. And this is where I turn again to Internet-democracy discussions, because the resources to develop this radicalization can be found in another group of Internet-public sphere commentators, whose general position I refer to as agonistic because it emphasizes political struggle and conflict as central to democracy.

The agonistic internet-public sphere position
Agonistic Internet-democracy commentators – theorists, researchers and practitioners (but few policy makers) – draw upon an understanding of the

14. A number of the radical democrats referred to here draw upon Fraser (1992), who in turn draws from Gramsci in developing the idea of subaltern counter-publics undertaking counter-hegemonic politics. These commentators often drop the adjective 'subaltern'. Subaltern refers to contestation of dominance from a subordinated position. However, as Warner (2002: 119) notes, a counter-public will always be coming from a subordinate position: 'subaltern' is implicit in 'counter', and thus is assumed to be encapsulated in any further reference to counter-publics.

15. For exemplary cyber-parody see The Yes Men www. theyesmen.org.

public sphere that makes central the very radicalism and contestation so poorly accounted for by the deliberative position (see Bickel 2003; Downey and Fenton 2003; Gallo 2003; Kahn and Kellner 2004, 2005; Kellner 1998; Kowal 2002; Langman 2005; Palczewski 2001; Salazar 2003; Warf and Grimes 1997). Drawing strongly upon radical democracy theory (in particular neo-Gramscian theory), the Internet is conceived as a site and means of political struggle and conflict: a contested terrain where exclusion and domination as well as solidarity and resistance are reproduced.

On the one hand, the Internet is seen as reproducing dominant discourses, in the sense of discourse as defined above, not just through sites of instrumental-strategic action but also through spaces performed as deliberative publics. In agreement with the concerns of deliberative public sphere commentators, this reproduction includes powerful social interests promoting dominant meanings and practices, while blocking marginalized ones, through the ownership and control of the medium. For instance, corporate portals and mainstream media sites, that reproduce dominant discursive framings, are capturing the majority of online attention for news and information (see Dahlberg 2005b). However, dominant discourses are also reproduced more subtly, and possibly more readily, simply by being brought into online interaction by the (offline) subject positioning(s) of participants.

On the other hand, and in contrast to the mass media, the Internet is seen as a force for 'radical democracy'. The Internet is seen as helping marginalized groups – those groups associated with discourses excluded from the mainstream public sphere – develop their own deliberative forums, link up, and subsequently contest dominant meanings and practices. There are three parts to this argument. First, the Internet provides communication spaces for members of groups associated with marginalized discourses to develop counter-publics[14] – 'alternative' discursive arenas constituted by a number of participants engaging in debate and criticism that strengthens and develops oppositional discourses (identities, interpretations, social imaginaries and languages) to those dominating the mainstream public sphere. Second, the Internet's interactivity and reach assists politically diverse and geographically dispersed counter-publics in finding shared points of identity and forming counter-public networks and coalitions (or articulations) of radical discourses, leading to the development of more powerful oppositional discourses. Identification is particularly found through common experiences of exclusion and domination. This articulation of identity and discourse gives strength to marginalized publics weakened by isolation. Third, the Internet supports online and offline counter-public contestation of dominant discourses, and hence the contestation of the deliberations of the mainstream public sphere. The Internet's interactivity assists the organization of contestation while its (relatively) open networked system enables the implementation of contestation, including e-mail protests, denial of service communication disruptions and semiotic warfare (e.g. site graffiti, e-mail spam attacks and cyber-parody interventions).[15] These actions attempt to draw attention to excluded positions and to the critiques of dominant discourses. Contestation also takes place more subtly by way of counter-publicity filtering through

culture and subtly challenging dominant discourse, filtering that the semi-decentralized, interactive and hyper-linked communications of the Internet is seen as significantly contributing to.

This is not simply a description of the formation of counter-publics online and the contestations of dominant discourse that results, but is also normative. According to these agonistic democrats, to advance democracy in the face of dominant discursive structuring of communicative interaction, the public sphere, as a general normative idealization, *should* include: the development and articulation of counter-publics and thus the fostering of oppositional discourses, as in the first and second points above; and subsequently, the counter-public contestation of dominant discourses and thus of mainstream public sphere deliberations, as in the third point. In turn, counter-public discourses will themselves be contested and eventually transformed, but here I am most interested in how counter-publics support contestation of dominant discourse.

Through the key concept of counter-publics, this agonistic understanding both maintains the importance of spaces of argumentation, through the notion of 'publics', and takes into account the very things ignored in the deliberative model: the democratic role of radicalism and of inter-discursive contestation. As such, 'counter-publics' enables the articulation of the deliberative public sphere and the post-Marxist understanding of discourse, resulting in a radicalized public sphere conception.

Counter-publicity is implicit in the drawing of deliberative boundaries and associated antagonism, given the logic of discursive inclusion/exclusion as discussed above. However, this necessity does not dictate the amount and strength, or indeed the form, of contestation. Contestation can either be expanded or shut down within particular social-political systems. For instance, a system may allow and even encourage deliberation within government, corporate, and officially sanctioned institutions and media, and yet restrict counter-hegemonic communications within civil society at large. This situation has been explicitly the case within some (so-called) communist states and implicitly within many Western democracies. Radical democracy requires the development of vibrant counter-publics and associated discourse that can actively and effectively contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere. The agonistic democrats referred to here are interested in the extent that the Internet is extending such development.

There are many examples given, and examined by, these agonistic democrats of the Internet supporting counter-public development, articulation and contestation. The most widely cited examples are in relation to anti-globalism:[16] the Zapitista's use of the Internet to help construct identity, mobilize trans-national support and organize protest against the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Mexican Government (Downey and Fenton 2003; Garrido and Halavais 2003; Kellner 1998; Kowal 2002); Indymedia sites providing 'alternative' news and linking geographically and ideologically dispersed elements of the 'anti-globalization' movement (Downey and Fenton 2003: 186, 187; Langman 2005); and the transnational advocacy groups that utilized the Internet to transmit information about, and successfully organize resistance against, the Multilateral

16. Globalism here refers to the global spread of capitalism, as distinct from globalization in general. The latter includes the development of global communication systems relied upon by the anti-globalism protestors.

Agreement on Investment (MAI) in the late 1990s (Johnston and Laxer 2003; Langman 2005; Smith and Smythe 2001).

Besides this networking against globalism, there are numerous other examples of the Internet supporting counter-public formation, articulation and contestation, from The Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan's (Rawa.org) use of the Internet to develop alternative social imaginaries and identities, and subsequently resistance against oppressive gender based norms of public and private life (Bickel 2003), to the 2003 global protests against the United State's invasion of Iraq and the subsequent activism related to the occupation (Kahn and Kellner 2005; Langman 2005). The Internet itself is becoming a focus of counter-public activism, as progressive groups and activists begin to challenge the Net's increasing colonization by state and corporate interests (Jordan, forthcoming).

The use of the Internet in fostering not only particular counter-publics but also linkages between publics and the contestation of dominant discourses is nicely illustrated by Moveon.org's activities in relation to the mainstream (government and corporate media led) United States discourse on the build up to the Iraq invasion, as outlined in Gallo's (2003) case study. Moveon.org is a 'progressive' political organization focused on United States' government policy. Moveon aims to promote democracy by using the Internet to build 'electronic advocacy groups' that will 'reconnect public opinion to government' through online interaction and activism. While there were (and are) many groups using the Internet to provide information and organize protest against the invasion, Moveon used (and continues to use) the Internet's interactivity and widespread reach to enable many ideologically diverse and geographically dispersed groups to articulate a common position of opposition to the war, and subsequently to organize large scale activism against dominant discourse online as well as off. In the United States, Moveon became a central actor in the mobilization of the anti-war movement that linked such disparate groups as churches, women's organizations, unions and military veterans. Central to the aim of Moveon was the effective communication and deliberation across the United States of the anti-war message against the state policing (e.g. the repetition of the 'you are either for us or against us' slogan) and corporate media self-policing (e.g. up to the point of not covering anti-war protests) of the discursive boundaries of public sphere deliberations. This policing promoted the pro-invasion position and restricted anti-invasion arguments, limiting mainstream public sphere deliberation of the 'war' to questions of tactical detail rather than questions of justice. The Internet was deployed by Moveon as a means to organize online and offline activism on a scale and in a form such as to overcome this policing. It was used to coordinate massive e-mail writing campaigns that grabbed the attention of the Government and the mass media – for instance a 'virtual march on Washington' bombarded the Senate and White House with over 400,000 messages, blocking phone lines to Washington for hours. The Internet was also used by Moveon to help organize huge physical anti-war protests in the United States and globally, and to raise funds and ideas for broadcasts on corporate media (mostly television advertisements).

Jodi Dean (2005) questions the effectiveness of such techno-politics, and in fact argues that it operates as a technological fetish protecting the

fantasy of an engaged subject, relieving participants of the guilt of not being active citizens while foreclosing real political participation. As a result she sees initiatives like Moveon as contributing to the extension of 'communicative capitalism': 'that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technology . . . [b]ut instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most the world's peoples' (Dean 2005: 55). It is true that much online politics largely amounts to the reiteration of dominant discourses and the extension of capitalist social relations. However, not all online communication can be said to simply contribute to communicative capitalism and the foreclosure of the political. Much online activism is driven by counter-publics fostering strongly anti-capitalist discourse (Downey and Fenton 2003; Kahn and Kellner 2005; Meikle 2002; Vegh 2003). These counter-publics are involved in significant efforts to effectively challenge mainstream public sphere communication and to consequently transform social conditions. While successes are sporadic at best, this is because there are powerful forces mounted against counter-hegemonic publics, forces fighting to maintain the boundaries of dominant public discourse and close off dissent. Such Internet-supported struggle over the boundaries of communication is not technological fetish but constitutes 'real' political action. Setbacks to counter-publicity, such as CBS's refusal to broadcast a Moveon sponsored advertisement during the 2004 Super Bowl, only demonstrate that counter-public discourse fostered by the Internet is perceived as posing a significant threat to power. Powerful forces are acting to block counter-hegemonic discourse online and offline from effectively confronting dominant discourses and radically challenging status quo social relations.

It is, however, important not to overestimate the role of the Internet in comparison to other social, cultural and political factors. Johnston and Laxer's (2003) assessment of the Internet's role in the derailment of MAI and use by the Zapitistas shows that global networking has not played the decisive role in the success of these progressive activisms that some accounts suggest. However, there is no question that the Internet is enabling and extending counter-public deliberation, articulation and contestation of the dominant discourses defining the boundaries of the mainstream public sphere. At the same time, the Internet facilitates administrative power, flows of capital, liberal-consumer logics, and the extension of all sorts of conservative and reactionary elements.[17] As emphasized by the agonisitic commentators, the Internet is a contested terrain.

Envisioning a radicalized public sphere conception

The deliberative conception of the public sphere has become increasingly prominent within Internet-democracy discussion, research and practice. Indeed, the two-way, semi-decentralized communications enabled through Web publishing, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail lists and chat rooms do enable rational-critical deliberation, particularly when fostered by democratic initiatives like Moveon. Internet-deliberative democrats are not

17. As Downey and Fenton (2003: 197, 198) and Warf and Grimes (1997) point out, counter-publics do not necessarily take on progressive causes. However, by definition a 'public', in contrast to a single interest group, is democratically oriented and in this sense all publics are progressive.

utopian technological determinists. There is in fact much concern that online deliberation is being, and will increasingly be, limited due to contextual factors. However, the question that has been explored here is not the extent the deliberative public sphere is or will be extended through the Internet, but whether the model as drawn upon by Internet researchers, policy makers and practitioners, actually provides the basis for strong democracy, as claimed by advocates. This question has been explored in relation to the most significant criticism to be brought against the conception, that it neglects relations of power involved in deliberation. I have shown that while the model does take into account power more than critics suggest, it fails to adequately theorize the existence and democratic role of discursive radicalism and inter-discursive contestation.

Rather than discard the public sphere, I have argued that the conception can be extended and radicalized through the introduction of another public sphere understanding that is being deployed in Internet-democracy commentary and research. I refer to this second understanding as agonistic because it focuses less upon the performance of rational deliberation online than upon the way the Internet operates as a site of discursive struggle and conflict. Adherents of this agonistic understanding point to the reproduction of dominant discourses online, including through spaces identifying as deliberative. They also point to how marginalized groups use the Internet as a means for the formation of counter-publics, the articulation of identities and oppositional discourses, and the contestation of the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere.

The crucial move here is the introduction of the counter-publics concept. This concept enables the articulation of rational-critical deliberation with discursive radicalism and inter-discursive contestation. The term 'public' maintains argumentation as central to the constitution of diverse spaces of democratic interaction, while 'counter' points to the *fact and democratic role of* discursive radicalism and inter-discursive contestation and subsequently to a 'radicalized' public sphere conception. As such, the public sphere is no longer understood as a singular deliberative space but a complex field of multiple contesting publics, including both dominant and counter-publics of various forms.

It is important to emphasize that the aim of supporting counter-publics and contestation should not be to simply bring excluded voices into the mainstream public sphere(s). Rather, the aim must be to contest the discursively defined boundaries of mainstream public sphere deliberations. Inclusion of oppositional discourse in mainstream public spheres necessitates de-politicizing assimilation, unless there is effective disruption of the dominant discourses defining 'legitimate' deliberation.

This radical public sphere conception is in line with Internet practice. In other words, the radicalized norm is grounded in online interaction, as shown by examples given in this paper with respect to both the deliberative and agonistic models. However, this grounding only means that a radical public sphere is possible. The question now is: how to foster and expand this public sphere? This is a question for further research. Moreover, given its critical status – an idealization drawn from and yet able to guide practice – rigorous normative and empirical interrogation of the

radicalized model needs to be undertaken. The contribution of the present discussion has been to show that for theorizing and research focused upon the extension of a radical democratic conception of the public sphere through cyberspace (and other mediums), we need to focus not only on fostering deliberation, but also upon the development of counter-publics of excluded discourse and the contestation of the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere on- and offline.

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