

BYTES THAT BITE: THE INTERNET AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

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Introduction: The Democratic Toolkit

Throughout history, technology has affected the modes of political communication as well as the outcomes of democratic decision making.¹ Whether we consider face-to-face communication in early democracies, the “republic of letters”, the invention of printed books, leaflets and newspapers, or telephone, radio, and television, it is clear that all had and have impacted upon both the modes and the results of political interaction. The emergence of new computer technologies, in particular the Internet and its extension to a broader public since the early 1990s, is one further step in the technological evolution of political tools. This latest technological development is likely to remain with us for decades to come.

The growth rate of participants in the Internet within the last five years has been tremendous. Not only scientists and businesses, but political organizations, parties, discussion circles, and lobbyists have recently joined the Internet. Even though similar developments have started in Europe and Asia, most activity is in the United States. Grass-root political movements in the United States have been working the net for nearly twenty years. But by 1993, professional political agencies, government, and big business had also begun to use the net for political purposes.² In fall of 1996, of the 14 million people in the US who regularly used the World Wide Web, more than a third accessed it for political information.³ During the 1996 presidential campaign, the Internet was a battleground. Most campaign managers agree that this trend will continue and that there will be a serious on-line battle in the year 2000.

What the Internet means for democracy, indeed, what, exactly, computer democracy might mean, is unclear and controversial. While some regard the Internet as an information-gathering tool, others praise its deliberative potential. Some emphasize its role in the process of political will formation. Still others want to use it as a tool for decision-making. Bill Gates envisions voters as being “able to cast their ballots from home or their wallet PCs with less risk of miscounts or frauds.”⁴ Thus, some view the net as complementary to existing representative democracy, while others argue more radically that electronic media will conquer many of the problems of scale that made direct democracy an impracticable ideal. For them, the hope is that electronic town meetings and push-button

democracy will finally replace the old institutions of representative democracy: “in information societies of the very near future . . . major policy decisions can be instigated, formulated, and decided by direct democracy.”⁵

Despite the widespread contention surrounding the specific relation of the new technology to existing democratic institutions, I find that assessments of the Internet generally tend toward one of two positions. The first group, I call them the “optimists”, have high expectations for “computer democracy”. These advocates of the technological turn in democratic thinking see the new technologies as offering an even brighter future to democracy. United States Vice-President Al Gore speaks of the “information highway” as being a “metaphor for democracy itself”; he envisions a “new Athenian Age of democracy.”⁶ House Speaker Newt Gingrich says that Internet users are at the “frontiers of a new democracy.”⁷ In 1992, Ross Perot made the idea of an Electronic Town Hall a central part of his campaign for the presidency. Members of the computer culture community are even more enthusiastic. According to Jeffrey Reiss, who recently drew up plans for a Democracy Channel, the new media offer a way to energize the electorate, democratize debate, and create consensus. John Katz, a writer for WIRED magazine, claims that the net “offers what Paine and his revolutionary colleagues hoped for – a vast, diverse, passionate, global means of transmitting ideas and opening minds.”⁸

In contrast to the optimists, a second group is more hesitant in its assessment of the Internet’s democratic potential. Political theorists such as Benjamin Barber argue that technological innovations such as the Internet are “neutral tools” which could and should be used to modernize and improve democracy.⁹ Much of his work involves identifying threats to democracy and finding ways to strengthen the democratic public sphere. I call this position the “neutralist” view.

There has been a lot of criticism recently of the optimists’ view. Critics claim that there is a hiatus between the promised land of the democratic infrastructure and the real working of networks. The chances of overcoming this gulf are not very promising.¹⁰ In this paper, I want to focus on the neutralist view. I will argue that computer communication itself has consequences for the quality of political thought produced in its presence. These effects are harmful both to the deliberative procedures and to the public-oriented content of democratic interactions. Some of my concerns may be due to the current state of technological development. Thus, the introduction of computer programs which translate every utterance into every language, of voice-related computing, and of visual screen communication may have positive impacts I am not able to anticipate. By themselves, however, these new inventions cannot fulfill even the moderate hopes of the neutralists.

I. The State of the Debate

Although the jury is still out, the main arguments around computer democracy involve:

1. Stratification. Due to the unequal distribution of technical skills and financial resources, computer democracy will amplify social stratification and lead to new distinctions between an elite core of affluent knowledge workers and a growing class of technological have-nots.
2. Commercialization. The influx of private companies will change the character of the Internet, making it an instrument of further commercialization. In so hindering direct communication between citizens, the net will lead to an even more perfect commodification of the public sphere.
3. "Panoptification." The shift of political and day-to-day communication into the net will increase government agencies' and capitalist companies' capacity for control. Since nearly every move on the Internet leaves a traceable digital shadow, the new communication and information technologies enable a small number of people, government or corporate agencies, say, to monitor and potentially control a large number of citizens.
4. De-Realization. Communication by means of the new technologies will increase the distance from reality. The artificial realities produced through sign systems create new desires and needs. Through continual stimulation, they heighten the population's level of desire, keeping consumer society going.

Advocates of computer democracy try to counter these fears with a set of ambitious promises. Although not naive to business, they should not be dismissed as simply opening the door to corporate interests. They insist on the positive technological qualities of the net. Even though some of the early proponents of network democracy are more skeptical today, they continue to insist on the "democratic potential" of the net.¹¹ They make four main claims in favor of the net:

1. Immunizing against Authoritarianism. Because it sets up discussions that cannot be controlled by any authoritarian power, the Internet creates democratic virtual communities. If they want to survive in the global economy, countries like China or Singapore will, as a consequence, be forced to become more open. The net enhances human rights and spreads democracy. According to a recent study by the RAND corporation, there is even a causal empirical connection between the availability of E-mail and democracy.¹²
2. Easy Access. Every agency, party, or interest group has an inexpensive opportunity to post information on the net. From the perspective of the citizen, the net provides direct and unfiltered access to this information. Furthermore, since the Internet does not depend on commercial advertising, it offers political communication much more cheaply than television, radio, or print media are able to.
3. Critical Public Sphere. Interaction on the net and information provided by the net subvert traditional power structures by enhancing citizens' independence from government agencies and big business. Citizens interact in a terrain less shaped by the efforts of spin doctors, advertising executives, and public relations managers. The Internet creates a grass-roots based counter-public sphere. New software allows individuals to communicate across national borders. It enables them to create groups and information pools outside of government authority.

4. Universal access. The Internet has redefined citizenship. It is the first world-wide medium in which people can communicate directly, quickly, and reliably. They can form distant, but diverse and cohesive, political communities not bound by the nation state.

Some advocates of the internet like Howard Rheingold have discovered Habermas's notion of the public sphere as a normative justification for their claims.¹³ Indeed, viewed in terms of contemporary democratic theory, the positive qualities attributed to the Internet strikingly resemble the Habermasian unrestricted public sphere. Even the metaphors are similar. According to Habermas, "technologies of communication . . . make possible a highly differentiated network of public spheres."¹⁴ In his descriptions of the democratic ideal, he advocates a "decentered society" in which "subjectless forms of communication . . . regulate the flow of deliberations."¹⁵ The attendant public sphere should consist of an "open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal, social, and substantial boundaries." In such a "discursive structuring of public networks and arenas" popular sovereignty "becomes anonymous."¹⁶ Nancy Fraser describes her vision of "Multiple Publics" as being "porous" and "open-ended"¹⁷ in order to promote intercultural communication. And according to Seyla Benhabib, faxes and e-mail serve as a model for deliberative democracy. "Interlocking and overlapping networks" are "loosely associated" and form "multiple foci of opinion formation and dissemination which impact each other in free and spontaneous processes of information."¹⁸ Most importantly, if one accepts the claims of the optimists, the new technology seems to match all basic requirements of Habermas's normative theory of the democratic public sphere: it is a universal, anti-hierarchical, complex and demanding mode of interaction. Because it offers universal access, uncoerced communication, freedom of expression, an unrestricted agenda, participation outside of traditional political institutions and generates public opinion through processes of discussion, the Internet looks like the most ideal speech situation.

History has proven notoriously unkind when it comes to predictions concerning the impact of technologies. After witnessing the demonstration of television in 1939, a reviewer for *The New York Times* concluded: "The problem with television is that people must sit and keep their eyes glued on a screen; the average American family hasn't time for it."¹⁹ Taking into account the danger involved in making predictions regarding the impact of the new technologies, I nonetheless express the following speculations. My next three arguments try to challenge the way the neutralist view underestimates how computer interaction might distort citizenship.

II. "Encrypted Democracy": Free Speech and Democratic Censorship

Democratic theories disagree about the limits which should be set on the content of public speech. Some argue that hate speech, for example, is one of the costs of

free speech. Others argue that hate speech violates the normative presuppositions of democratic discourse and should therefore be regulated. The question of democratic censorship is an ongoing normative debate.²⁰ I am not arguing for democratic censorship in this paper. I am claiming that the mere existence of the Internet cuts off this normative debate by putting a premium on the libertarian position.

An argument often stated in favor of the democratizing potential of the Internet is its alleged "free flow of information." The reluctance of Singapore, Iran, China, and Cuba to open full access to the net is supposed to prove this point. In contrast to authoritarianism, there is no censoring on the net, not political, criminal, or moral. At the same time key encryption has advanced technologically to the point of being unbreakable even by the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA). For fifty years, the NSA held the monopoly on cryptography. Now it fears that new encryption techniques allow organized international crime, terrorists, drug smugglers, and spies to use the net for uncontrollable communication. This possibility has led to the formation of a coalition of Internet critics that ranges from feminists wishing to ban sexist material on the net, to police and government agencies fearing encrypted communication by international bands of terrorists or spies, to private companies wanting to secure their copyrights, to family-values type of conservatives trying to protect society's morals.

In 1992 the NSA proposed a law that would require a standard key encryption norm called "Clipper-Chip." Clipper-Chip is a system that enables citizens to send securely encrypted messages to each other while establishing a backdoor that would allow state agencies to decrypt the data. The idea was that state agencies would have to get approval from a Federal Court in order to do so. Resistance by a coalition representing the computer industry, telephone companies, encryption businesses, and online activists like the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) prevented the law from being enacted in its original form. The U.S. government later proposed a new standard called "Key Escrow Encryption" that has similar technological qualities as Clipper-Chip. At the same time, however, computer freaks like John Gilmore and Philip Zimmermann worked on their own encryption techniques. The American government gave in in January 1996 when the encryption program PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) became legally available on the net (where it had been circulating since 1993).

In the United States, PGP has changed the balance between government and citizens. For the first time, the state cannot interfere in communications between citizens. Thus laws like the "Communication Decency Act" of February 1996 (which led to protests on the net worldwide, symbolized through black screens and blue ribbons) have no real consequences. In Europe, governments have not yet given in. In September 1995, the European Parliament passed a resolution urging national governments to develop techniques to counter cryptography on the net. It is not clear who will win in Europe, government agencies wanting to ban alternative citizens' encryptions or online libertarians.

My point is that this technical question has political implications. Encryption

technology confronts us with a hard choice that must be decided politically. The Internet does not differentiate between private and public realms. We cannot simply redraw the traditional boundary between public communication (in newspapers or on TV) and private communication (in a letter or on the phone). Electronic information can be treated as both. This creates a dilemma. Either one wants to control the spread of “bad,” “undemocratic,” “dangerous,” “false,” or “criminal” information. Or one follows the arguments of EFF, joins them in their libertarian call for “civil rights in cyberspace,” and declares all communication on the net matters of private interest. Because the distinction between private and public has collapsed, either choice will have tremendous effects on democracy.

The end of censorship leads to a situation in which the state has no means by which to regulate hate speech on the net. In Germany, Nazi-emblems and the denial of the Holocaust are illegal. The Internet gives neo-Nazis new ways to circumvent these laws. German neo-Nazis use commercially available software to exchange encrypted messages that contain these forbidden symbols and messages. German authorities are unable to penetrate these networks. It is difficult to imagine enforcing the legal right of “factual correction” or libel laws on defamation of a person in cyberspace. In Germany, the government seems to follow the libertarian American approach. The proposal for a national “Multimedia Law” in May 1996 defines all net communication as private. According to the Secretary of Justice, Schmidt-Jorzig, Jews in Germany have to give up the idea that the denial of the Holocaust should be censored and minorities have to live with hate speech on the net.²¹

The Internet is cutting off the ongoing debate over democratic censorship by putting a premium on the libertarian position. As a consequence, the new technology urges us to find new forms of dealing with hate speech. The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles started a “Cyber-Watch” initiative. Other groups of the cyber-civil-society are proposing “more speech” against hate speech. But there are reasons to be skeptical about whether the activities of the “virtual civil society” will be feasible in coping with this new challenge without the help of a legal system or “constitution of the net.”

III. “Dissolved Judgment Junctions”: Information Overflow and Democratic Interaction

Political judgment is an art on which democracies rely. Judgment has a twofold basis: the character or virtue of the citizen (his or her cognitive framework) and the information he or she selects and collects (the raw data). The new technologies have drastically expanded the available volume of information. Traditional media usually form some kind of communication “junctions” or filters that help to collect, evaluate, and distribute information. Communication junctions enable actors who are confronted with an information overflow to distinguish between nonsense and information. Communication junctions thus include personal

friends, reliable speakers in an assembly, news anchors on TV or radio, a familiar newspaper, or political groups and parties.²²

Even though accountable communication junctions are necessary for survival in the ocean of information, from a normative point of view, their existence is ambivalent. They not only point to important information, they also exclude other arguments and information. Hence the well-being of democracies depends on the proper structure of these communication junctions. The organizational structure of these junctions deals with issues such as: Do different junctions check and balance each other? Are they open enough for new questions and problems? Is there a shared criterion for reliability? Is there a right to correct false information? In a democracy, communication junctions do more than enable actors to deal with the daily information overflow. They also provide shared knowledge and a shared focus of attention. The democratic ideal does not consist of merely one public sphere, but in order to have a democracy we must have overlapping issues which we regard as being politically relevant. Or, to rephrase a famous formulation by John Rawls: democracies need "overlapping discourses."

Not just commercialization but the intertwining of commercialization with disintegration or fragmentation leads to a decline of the public sphere. The emergence of cable TV has already been a solvent on the public sphere. Take the family of four watching four different channels in four different rooms. Here modern media fosters a development in which life styles and their implicit political discourses are isolated from one another. In radicalizing this tendency, the Internet is the ultimate opposition to the model of communication junctions. It is endless, nondiscriminating, and unfocused. It may be less repressive than the idea of democratic communication junctions, but this is only the case because it gets rid of the notion of the citizen.

With regard to its endlessness, the Internet seems to realize the "old bourgeois dream" (Stallabrass) of wishing to survey the world from one's own living room while having available the totality of all data. This idea of universal data access is based on a highly questionable diagnosis of the weaknesses of modern democracies. It assumes that modern democracies suffer from a lack of information. One could argue, however, that the problem is that citizens and modern politics are hardly exhausting the information already piled up.

Cybercitizens face the following practical problem in trying to distinguish among the information they get: with already thousands (and soon millions) of users posting messages, the valuable information gets lost or cannot even be found. There is nothing that points to the better and more reliable information and arguments. Users do not know in advance which messages are worth reading. Even if you select by subject area, there is no way to pick up only the interesting information. I am not arguing that network surfing is a waste of time, sometimes it is exciting. My argument is that the credibility of information on the net gets lost as long as there are no substitutes for the traditional communication junctions.

How can the user of the Internet react to its unlimited openness? She can (a) adjust to this fact and learn to deal with the amount of data herself. This is an improbable expectation. She can (b) stop trying to evaluate the reasonableness of net data, perhaps losing the capacity for such evaluation altogether. This kind of reaction could thus take different forms. There might be an increased belief in some of the obscure worldviews presented on the network (fundamentalist reaction) or a general skepticism toward all information, simply giving up the idea of any political rationality (postmodern reaction). A final possibility (c) that I will take up later is the emergence of new communication junctions that could serve as indicators for the reliability of information.

In response to reaction (a), the adjustment to the amount of information faces the additional challenge of verification. The literature in social psychology indicates that whenever a new medium emerged in the past, people by and large applied the judgment processes they already possessed. Initially that led to comical mistakes, but people seemed to have learned how to deal with the demands of movies, radio, and television. In the process of perceiving virtual reality, however, people are forced to make increasingly sophisticated judgments about what is "real" and what is not.²³ Cost-benefit analysis makes it unlikely that users will expend the time and mental effort required to test whether information is correct or not.

If, following the '96 presidential campaign in the U.S. on the Internet, users confront the reliability problem head-on, how can they separate the serious sites from the parodies and hoaxes.²⁴ Media technology is increasingly able to give the user the impression of being there. Social psychologists argue that making judgments about reality has become more difficult in virtual reality than in other forms of communication.²⁵

It appears as if reaction (b) is empirically plausible. The computer itself fosters such a reaction insofar as the particular form of communication encourages an equalizing relationship to all contents. The lack of hierarchy in presentation gives the impression that all pieces of information are equivalent. Let me illustrate this thesis with several examples. The news-group "Sovereign Citizens" has developed a theory explaining why nobody is legally obliged to pay income taxes (they argue that national citizenship is a government plot and that the federal government has no jurisdiction within the states). The "Neo-Confederates" claim that the Civil War had "nothing to do with slavery."²⁶ Other examples include the alleged helicopter invasions from the New World Order that became part of the right-wing militia *Weltanschauung*. Finally, the Oklahoma Bombing was the subject of a national town meeting on the net. According to close observers of these discussions, "much of what passed for information . . . was based more on rumor and attitude than fact," encouraging the political paranoia which fueled the bombing itself.²⁷ According to Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Assistant Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, the new technology has helped the militias: "When you are relegated to putting out leaflets or crude books, you're not going

to get anywhere . . . But now, out of nowhere, you can get into the minds of millions of Americans. You can create a sense of community and empowerment."²⁸

I'm not claiming that there was no craziness, conspiracy theory, or fanaticism before the Internet. Nor do I think that it is the question of the price we necessarily have to pay for the freedom of speech which is at stake here. Rather I want to stress that the net is more than a neutral tool for expressing political opinions insofar as it nourishes these sorts of tendencies more than any other previous media has done.

The appropriate answer to the problem of the lack of focus of Internet discussions and information can certainly be found in the creation of new filter systems. An already existing example comes from the discussion circles, the "lists," generally open to everyone, but whose access is monitored by editors or mediators. Electronic journals and newsletters are also already using supervising devices. In *Being Digital*, Nicholas Negroponte suggests that the answer to the billions of bytes available to the individual user lies in the creation of "Intelligent Agents," computer programs that filter, sort, prioritize, and manage multimedia on behalf of each individual user. From his point of view, the problem is largely technical and due to poor user interface. His ideal is an individualized newspaper: "As if the New York Times were publishing a single newspaper tailored to your interests."²⁹ Being digital will change the nature of mass media from a process of pushing information at people to one of allowing people (or rather their respective computers) to pull out what they want. The California company Pointcast provides individualized news reports. News of interest to particular users pops up on their computer screens at regular intervals. Pointcast develops its individual collections by evaluating a user's net activity. The longer the user is connected, the closer Pointcast's selection comes to his or her personal interests.

With "intelligent agents," there is no space for the notion of a commonly shared public sphere and for accountability. Instead, according to Negroponte, "the information highway will become more of a boutique business."³⁰ In Negroponte's economic model of news selection, the user's individual and private interests are the key to selecting news. The interface-systems are programmed to collect personalized summaries. Despite the expanded volume of available political information on the net, this will likely lead to a less informed electorate. Many people now get some of their political news inadvertently (for example, by glancing over all political headlines while turning to a special section). In Negroponte's world people can avoid confronting bad news. His ideal net users are consumers too busy to be unhappy. In their role as citizens though, they are lost in cyberspace. For the libertarian, democracy and consumer choice are one and the same.

But, is getting news off the net really so different from what we already have? We already pay for information when we buy newspapers or watch television (either directly through cable, or indirectly by paying the advertising costs built into the prices of consumer items). The new mode provided by Internet only

becomes threatening if one takes into account the unique status of cyberspace. Most of the business protagonists do not see the net as a complement to existing media. Instead they intend to replace existing media with the new "multimedia." If the net becomes the primary source of information, democracy will be deeply affected. The transformation of all information into saleable goods not only damages the egalitarian underpinnings of democracy, but also destroys the notion of a common public sphere.

IV. "Disembodied Discourse:" Political Discourse in Front of Screens

"Interactivity" is the magic word at the heart of the democratic promise of the Internet. The Internet has made the limits of space and time disappear. The political discourses on the Internet take place between individuals who have never met and probably will never meet each other in person. To what extent does the disembodied political communication in discussion circles, bulletin boards, or "cyber-salons" meet democratic imperatives? What kind of citizens communicate in the disembodied condition? To what extent does communication on the Internet affect the very mode of interaction and lead to electronic solipsism?

Empirical findings indicate that users of the net are not just interested in information. Many are social beings looking for "affiliation, support, and affirmation."³¹ Proponents of computer democracy see the Internet as a wonderful place to meet, communicate, and fulfill these demands. It is a communicative paradise where communication becomes more sensitive and reflective because every utterance has to be written down. It is an environment that enables people to overcome shyness and cooperate with others. Anonymity lets communication become more intimate, spontaneous, personal, or even confessional. In this view, Internet communication is a more demanding mode of communication than mere "talk." Consequently, some advocates of the net expect an increase in rationality. They hope for a renaissance of the "republic of letters" (Katz).

Some research has been done on the equalizing effects of on-line communication.³² According to these findings, "ascribed and achieved status characteristics . . . are far less likely to determine interaction patterns, leadership roles, decision-making influence, and other outcomes in comparison to groups that meet in person."³³ But not much empirical research has been collected on the alleged "deliberative qualities" of political discourse on the net. The more or less impressionistic evidence currently at hand, however, does not support the paradise thesis at all. According to Clifford Stoll, one of the early proponents of cyberspace in the 1970s, the virtual community today "is hardly a tolerant and accepting neighbourhood."³⁴ Communication on the net has become rude and harsh, and anonymity mostly works as a shield for verbal cruelty.

One has to be cautious with any prediction, because it could simply rest on a crude technological determinism; nevertheless, I offer a tentative list of possible reasons for a negative prognosis.

First, the Internet began as a technical community with virtual neighbors helping each other out. An ethnographer explains this early "friendly anarchy" by the fact that the small group of users had developed a feeling of community; they shared the experience of being proud members of a technologically advanced elite.³⁵ Over time and after the numerical increase in participants, the friendly tone disappeared. The early net was cozy not because, but despite, its technical qualities.

Second, online debates, especially when it comes to politics, are often polarized by messages that take extreme positions. Often, these debates devolve into exchanges of flames and insults. This may have to do with the distinct libertarian, or ignorant, character of debates on the net. The motto is "let me think whatever I want and you think your own stuff." The American "show-and-tell" has entered the political realm and become transformed. As the story goes, in the classical *agora* there was competition for the most reasonable way to solve a problem and the best way to build consensus. In the electronic *agora*, competition is for the most outrageous, provocative, and crazy point of view. This attitude attracts the creation and expression of extreme political positions. In network communication one finds many outspoken opinions, less-informed dialogue, and not much consensus-seeking dialogue. It is the political discourse of "show and yell."³⁶ Stoll gives the example of Online Interviews to illustrate another characteristic of net-interaction. Previously, newspaper readers followed arguments which were longer than what can appear on a computer screen. Electronic interviews tend to shorten and simplify complex issues. The process of typing encourages short and simple questions and equally concise replies. As Stoll puts it: "Just as TV gives us soundbites, the online-interview provides one-line answers."³⁷

Third, since identification is not required on the net, you can be as anonymous as you wish. According to Stoll: "Anonymity encourages behavior that says 'Hey, I'm two thousand miles from you, you can't do anything to me, you don't even know my name.'" Stoll continues: "Rude individuals take out their aggression on newcomers, flaming them for minor goofs. It's reminiscent of the intense hostility of drivers in a traffic jam, though even more public." Electronically mediated communication filters out the contextuality and warmth central to morally engaged political interaction. It fosters the tendency to distance one's actions and decisions from moral consequences. Moreover, membership in virtual communities proves to be more unstable than forms of face-to-face communities, and allows participants to withdraw easily from any adverse responses to their behavior or opinions.

Fourth, the network presents an unreal world which allows all of us to create one or even more virtual identities. No doubt this can be a relief. It is fascinating to hear how individuals have re-invented themselves on the net. According to Sherry Turkle, this "Cyrano-Effect" allows the invention and self-designation of even sexual and ethnic identities.³⁸ In an electronic essay, Mark Poster mentions a case where a man presented himself on a bulletin board as a disabled woman in

order to experience the intimacy he admired in female conversations.³⁹ With the help of the Internet, the philosophical ideas of Lacan, Foucault and Deleuze on the construction of the self finally come true.

The “Cyrano-Effect” is a dead end street. In most of the cases people pretend to have those positive characteristics they feel they lack. “Virtual identities” overall tend to be somehow “better” than the real ones. Such wishful-thinking-presentation resembles self-deception in voting behavior. Quite often voters want to be on the winner’s side; nobody wants to be the poor person whose welfare check is constantly debated. Thus, some voters do not follow their preferences or interests but imagine that they belong to a class that can afford to have other interests (or meta-preferences). So I agree with Turkle that cyberspace is the ultimate extension of postmodern identity politics. It encourages people to facilely invent their own identity. In politics, this may lead to a boomerang-effect. It is likely that future democracies will have to deal with an increase in illusionary political meta-preferences.

The virtualization of human communication effects a separation between physical and digital reality. The loss of physical confrontation changes the way people interact. In digital reality, there is no space for glances, physical expressions, gestures, intonation, and overtones. Digital communication stresses the exchange of pure data and allows participants to cut off unwelcome communication with just a move of a finger. Paul Virilio envisages digital human beings which totally mutate to isolated actors.⁴⁰ Names like “salon,” “meeting-place,” and “virtual communities,” indicate that at least today, however, digital communication is still parasitical upon physical communication.

Finally, just like voting by mail, political use of the Internet makes citizenship more convenient. It makes it easier for the elderly, for parents of young children, or disabled persons to participate in politics. At the same time, the Internet takes politics farther away from its public habitation. Preferences on public issues are expressed literally from the center of the private existence. Democracy is divorced from the symbolic spaces of concern for the common good. The Internet will probably encourage privatistic judgments on public issues and thus erode public oriented citizenship.

V. Conclusion: The Democratic Rubicon

Historically, increases in the scale of political communities have deeply affected normative democratic theory. This has led many to argue that the traditional version of face-to-face interaction as the center of political decision-making is no longer possible. The concept of representative government was one of the theoretical reactions to this problem. In a similar way, the overcoming of the limits of time and space through the Internet will affect at least some presuppositions of normative democratic theory (like democratic censorship versus radical freedom of speech or the status of face-to-face interaction in the process of citizen’s political will formation).

The insight that computer technology is not a neutral tool should not lead us to the conclusion that all applications of computer networks must *a priori* be seen in negative terms. What is needed is a set of more complex criteria than those following from the “neutralist” position. This criteria must first take seriously the objections raised with respect to the manner in which computer interaction may be harmful both to deliberative procedures and to the public-oriented content of democratic interactions. In addition, the use of the Internet has to be carefully situated within the context of already existing democratic institutions. And finally, a change of perspective is necessary. This perspective reaffirms democracy and not technology as the starting point of any reform agenda. And so, let us ask: to which problems of modern democracies can the use of the Internet contribute a solution in accordance with deliberative democracy?

By elaborating these criteria, one can mark a “democratic rubicon”, a boundary for the democratic use of the Internet. Although the exact line should be drawn in the course of future research, a few examples may illustrate what I have in mind. Reforms which aim at plebiscitary push-button voting are an obvious trespass of the democratic rubicon. Generally speaking, the Internet is more useful on the level of opinion-formation than on the level of decision-making. But even here, the technical attributes of the net set narrow limits. The Internet is less applicable for the creation of new forms of democratic public spheres than for the support of already existing ones. In particular, the net allows for far easier access to documents, research statements, and other forms of factual information. It cannot, though, be a satisfactory substitute for personal presence, and is therefore inappropriate to deal with every substantial issue equally. It is most helpful in giving access to technical data. In contrast, other issues on the political agenda, like questions of ethical self-understanding, the interpretation of needs, or issues of social policy, depend to some degree on the dimension of direct confrontation, personal experience, and visibility.

According to this vague set of criteria for the “democratic rubicon,” a worst case scenario would be a large scale computer democracy which supplants existing forms of political participation and is a means of making decisions on moral and ethical questions through pushing buttons from private homes. In such a scenario, political participation is reduced to the passive and private act of registering one’s own preconceived opinion on an issue. Participation is trivialized into feedback. H. Ross Perot’s Electronic Town Hall has obvious similarities to this worst case scenario. A better case would have the Internet supplementing existing political institutions. Here computer democracy would be based on an already existing community and used to distribute and collect information and to foster deliberation. The electronic town meeting (ETM) which was hosted by the Public Agenda Foundation in San Antonio, Texas in September 1994 comes close to this model.⁴¹

If we start with the normative premises that democracy contains elements of political deliberation, a distinction between private and public, and a public

sphere which in principle can be shared by all citizens, the current reform strategies for computer democracy are more of a threat than a promise. Sure, more empirical research has to be done, in particular, on the impact of computer communication on political discourses; at the current juncture, however, I believe that there are reasons to expect that the Internet may finally lead to a new wave of privatization of politics.

NOTES

1. The research for this paper began during a stay at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York as a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation in 1995/96. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University, The New School for Social Research, Freie Universität Berlin, and the Prague Conference on Social Philosophy and the Social Sciences. I wish to thank Benjamin Barber, Chad Goldberg, Stacy McGoldrick, Shane Kenyon, Rainer Schmalz-Bruns, Andrej Zaslove, and in particular Jodi Dean and Jeffrey Wengrofsky for critical suggestions.

2. For a history of the development of the Internet, see Ed Krol, *The Whole Internet*. Second Edition, (Sebastopol, 1994).

3. For this estimation see: *The New York Times* (29 October, 1996), E 13.

4. Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead* (New York, 1995), 271.

5. Roger Clarke, "Information Technology, Weapon of Authoritarianism or Tool of Democracy?," Electronic Essay at: <http://www.anu.edu.au/people/roger.clarke/dv/paper/authism.htm>.

6. Quoted in: James Brook/Iain Boal, eds, *Resisting the Virtual Life* (San Francisco, 1995), XII.

7. Newt Gingrich, *To Renew America* (New York, 1995), 125.

8. John Katz, "The Age of Paine" *Wired* (May, 1995): 154.

9. See Benjamin Barber's article in this issue of *Constellations*. Recent authors of Critical Theory also argue that modern media technology has to be viewed as a tool which – pace Adorno – could depending on their organization both undermine or strengthen the public sphere (see: Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume Two (Boston, 1988), 390; Jürgen Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," in Craig Calhoun, ed, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge/Mass, 1992), 437; Jean Cohen/Andrew Arato: *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge/Mass, 1992), 461.

10. For an overview on the objections see Hubertus Buchstein, "Cyberbürger und Demokratietheorie," in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 44 (1996): 589.

11. In the words of Howard Rheingold: "If a BBS (Computer Bulletin Board System) isn't a democratizing technology, there is not such thing. . . . I admit that I still believe that this technology, if properly understood and defended by enough citizens, does have democratizing potential in the way that alphabets and printing presses had democratizing effects", Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community* (Reading, 1994), 130, 279.

12. Robert Anderson et al, "Universal Access to E-Mail," Electronic Essay at: <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR650>.

13. See: Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community* (Reading, 1994), 274–280.

14. Jürgen Habermas, *The Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge/Mass, 1987), 360.

15. Jürgen Habermas, "Three Models of Democracy," *Constellations* I (1994): 7.

16. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge/Mass, 1996), 306, 171.

17. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," in Craig Calhoun, ed, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge/Mass, 1992), 122, 127.

18. Seyla Benhabib, "Deliberative Democracy," *Constellations* 1 (1994): 48, 35.

19. Quoted in: Jeffrey Abramson et al., *The Electronic Commonwealth* (New York, 1988), 7.

20. See, eg., Cass Sunstein, *Democracy and Free Speech* (Chicago, 1993); Owen M. Fiss, *The Irony of Free Speech* (New York, 1995).

21. See Interview with Secretary of Justice Schmidt-Jorzig in *Der Spiegel* (11 March, 1996), 102–104.
22. For a discussion of some of the effects of the collapse of boundaries between reliable and unreliable sources of information see Jodi Dean, “The Familiarity of Strangeness. Alien Abduction in American Popular Culture,” Paper, presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, August 1996, San Francisco.
23. According to Shapiro and McDonald the form of virtual reality experience raises a number of reality judgment issues as well as moral issues: “How much will a person who has experienced a real war through virtual reality feel like a veteran of that war? Would you want a doctor who had only done a surgery in virtual reality to perform that surgery on you? Should a person feel guilty about committing adultery in virtual reality? How should his or her spouse feel about it?” Michael Shapiro and Daniel McDonald, “I am not a Real Doctor, but I Play One in Virtual Reality: Implications of Virtual Reality Judgements about Reality,” *Journal of Communications* 42 (1992), 109.
24. Edmund Andrews, “The ‘96 Race in the Internet. Surfer Beware,” *The New York Times* (23 October, 1995), A 1.
25. See: John Steur, “Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence,” *Journal of Communications* 42 (1992): 73–93.
26. Barbara O’Brien, “Scary New ‘Isms’ at the Speed of Light,” *The New York Times*, 7 September, 1996.
27. John Schwarz and Howard Kurz, “Internet, Talk Radio. Let Citizen Sound off,” *Washington Post* (April, 1995), A22.
28. Rabbi Abraham Cooper in *The New York Times* (30 April, 1995), Section 4, 3.
29. Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York, 1995), 20.
30. *Ibid.*, 85.
31. L. Sproull, L./S. Faray, “Atheism, Sex, and Database. The Net as a Social Technology,” Paper at the Workshop on Public Access to the Internet at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, May 26–27, 1993.
32. On the equalizing effects, see: Kiesler, S./Dubrovsky, V. J./Sethna, B. N. “The Equalizing Phenomenon. Status Effects in Computer-Mediated and Face-to-Face Decision Making Group,” *Human-Computer Interaction* 6 (1991), 119–146.
33. Robert Anderson et al., “Universal Access to E-Mail,” Electronic Essay at: <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR650>.
34. Clifford Stoll, *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway* (New York, 1995), 220.
35. See: Sabine Helmers, “Internet im Auge der Ethnographin,” Working Paper Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, 1995, 16.
36. For a report on the battles of insults on the InfoNet in Telluride, Colorado, usually seen as the model case for wired communities, see *The Economist* (21 October, 1995), 33. The degree of verbal cruelty has been seen as such a serious threat that the Telluride InfoNet changed their policy. Some citizens are banished from the InfoNet and a group of operators decide on whether “offensive material” should be weeded out. Self-appointed chat-group moderators have the power to zap what they think is undesirable. Some other group-examples are documented in the appendix of Anderson et al. 1995 (quoted above).
37. Clifford Stoll in an interview in: *The New York Times* (30 April, 1995).
38. See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1995), and Sherry Turkle: Interview. In: *Die Tageszeitung* (Berlin) (19 March, 1996), 14–15.
39. See: Mark Poster, “Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere,” Electronic Essay at <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/~human/history/faculty/poster/mark/writings/democ.html>.
40. See Paul Virilio, *Die Eroberung des Körpers* (Frankfurt/M, 1996).
41. In September 1994 the Public Agenda Foundation hosted a two-hour electronic town meeting in San Antonio dealing with the health care crisis: “What distinguished the San Antonio forum

on health care was its form of interactive deliberation. Eight ordinary citizens were selected to appear on a panel, which was moderated by two people from Public Agenda. The panel, and the wider TV audience, reviewed seven options for cutting health care costs, from regulating drug prices to rationing expensive procedures to eliminating fraud and waste. Viewers watched mini-documentaries on each option and then saw the panel debating them. . . . Of the 18,000 San Antonio households watching, . . . 200 were selected to be part of the cross-sectional sample whose votes were tabulated by computers and quickly flashed on the TV screen. . . . As the panel discussion raged on, the group at least seemed to appreciate what a bitch the health care issue is. And many among the voting sample – during the course of the event itself – actually changed their minds on certain options,” Evan Schwartz, “Direct Democracy. Are you ready for the Democratic Channel,” *Electronic Essay* (1995).