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Original citation: Mercea, D., Lekakis, E. & Nixon, P. (2013). "Taking stock: a meta-analysis of the virtual public sphere in communication journals". In: P. Nixon, R. Rawal & D. Mercea (Eds.), Politics and the Internet in Comparative Context: Views from the Cloud. Routledge Research in Political Communication. (pp. 10-26). Oxford: Routledge. ISBN 9780415638678

Permanent City Research Online URL: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/3050/

Taking stock: A Meta-Analysis of the Virtual Public Sphere in Communication Journals

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Paul Nixon, Rajash Rawal and Dan Mercea (eds.) (2013) *Views from the Cloud:Politics, Citizens and the Internet in Comparative Perspective*, London: Routledge

The virtual public sphere is coming of age as a guiding concept for the scholarship that has mapped out online political deliberation. In this chapter we cross-examine the treatment of the concept in communication journals over the past decade. We focus on aspects of the virtual public sphere that have come under systematic scrutiny: access and inclusion, locality, fragmentation and power differentials. Debates around the existence of a potential reinvigorating relationship between new media and the public sphere have been proliferating since the mid-1990s. Yet they have not aligned towards a coherent and informed overarching argument. Zizi Papacharissi's (2002) article on the virtual public sphere has arguably become nothing short of a landmark within political communication research. Interrogating the mediation of political engagement by information and communication technologies (ICTs),'The virtual sphere: the internet as a public sphere' was in June 2012 the most cited article published in *New Media and Society*.

This chapter is a meta-analysis of the scholarship that has emerged on the virtual public sphere in communication journals in the decade since the publication of Papacharissi's piece. We adopt the term 'virtual public sphere' for the sake of consistency with the terminology deployed in the key primary reference. The journals at the heart of this analysis are all listed in the communication studies section of the Thomson's Social Science Citation Index (TSSI) and are published in English. They are generalist communication journals by virtue of their stated mission. They a) span a broad variety of social scientific disciplinary areas; b) are not focused on a narrowly drawn subject matter (e.g. journalism, language use, media economics, personal relationships, public relations, social interaction, the communication of science and technology, visual communication); and c) cover either empirical or theoretical aspects geared towards theory-building in the field of communication studies. On the basis of this filtering principle, 20 journals were selected for the purpose of this paper[i]. A search among the selected TSSI communication journals for articles that referred to the concept of the public sphere in their abstracts or key words (N=136) yielded 49 items which embed the public sphere in computer-mediated communication. Our choice

to review articles from Thomson indexed journals stems from a cognizance of the status value the index bestows on publications and the attendant sway they have on a disciplinary field (Amin & Mabe, 2000). Nonetheless, we remain critical of the index itself for reasons outlined elsewhere (Pauly and Stergiou, 2005).

We are at no point intimating that the analyses we encountered reflected directly on Papacharissi's piece. What we propose is an examination that revisits the concerns and expectations she has raised. First and foremost, we seek to provide a comprehensive picture of the virtual public sphere as it emerges from the scientific conversations fostered by these journals. Deliberation has been extoled as the cornerstone of democratic governance (Blumler & Coleman, 2009), virtuous for its educational qualities as well as for the possibility to render politics more tolerant, transparent and accountable (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Dahlgren, 2009). We note here the high density of theoretical pieces that reflect and propose revisions to the conceptual framework delineated by Habermas (1989). Below we also afford careful consideration to empirical treatments that are particularly meritorious for grounding and refining a theoretical model singled out for its unworldly detachment (Huspek, 2007a). We have taken a special interest in examinations of social media which seem scarce in the scholarship on the public sphere despite the interest these have raised in the literature on democratic participation (see for example Loader and Mercea, 2012). We note the increasing prevalence of social media as an additional conduit for deliberation within a changing virtual public sphere which seems to be somewhat overlooked in the majority of the case study articles.

It can hardly be an overstatement to say that the body of research examining the participatory virtues and pitfalls of the polymorphous communication ecology fostered by ICTs is both impressive and daunting. If one were to undertake an archaeological excavation of that ecology with the toolkit provided by Jussi Parikka (2012), a great flurry of scholarly intersections, cross-fertilizations and critical re-positionings would readily come to the fore. Herein, we attempt a review together with a critique of the arguments surrounding the virtual public sphere by way of a cross-examination departing from the following collection of points of deliberation articulated by Papacharissi (2002, 2010).

We begin by tracking the trajectory of research which has considered the demographic and thematic composition of the space for political discussion spun out of networked communication. Second, we reflect on the quality of such discussion particularly in terms of the civility and tolerance that of necessity underpin participation in the public sphere. Third, we reconsider the balance of power that pits together the concentrated special interests of internet entrepreneurs and the cacophony of concerns pursued by an inordinate number of subgroups that populate the general

public. These critical identifiable elements are part of a larger body of literature within communication science centred on issues of access and inclusion, notions of public and private, singularity and fragmentation or locality and scale (c.f. Calhoun, 2003; Curran, 1991; Dahlgren, 1995; Fraser, 1992; Goode, 2005; Keane, 1991) on which this chapter can only in passing touch upon.

From the outset, we have been highly cognizant that a study of this size cannot do complete justice to the extensiveness and depth of the studies we have scrutinized. With this undertaking, we solely seek to call attention to the consolidation of theoretical and empirical evidence which frames discussions on the potentialities and hindrances of ICTs for the articulation of deliberative democratic participation. In line with the reviewed articles, we focus chiefly on technologically saturated societies where institutional politics are in crisis. Nonetheless, we recognize an epistemological limitation in the almost exclusive confinement of the remit of those articles to the English-speaking countries of the North-Atlantic rim (c.f. Dahan, 2007; Ndlela, 2007).

The Mediation of the Public Sphere

Before embarking on an examination of the three topics at the heart of this piece -the composition, civility and the power differentials in the virtual public sphere- we pay heed to an argument that illustrates just how divergent considerations on the notion of public sphere may be. We have been forewarned that the public sphere 'always appears, never is' (Sinekopova, 2006: 517). In spite of successive revisions to the concept carried out by Habermas himself aimed at softening its normative character, instead portraying it as a more fluid as well as more fragmented field for deliberation (1998), the public sphere remains epistemologically disputed. Illustratively, it stands accused of harbouring a number of 'rhetorical biases' which, in the contemporary ICT ecology, render it a 'static' concept ill-equipped to capture the contraction of time in online interaction (2006:215). Reflecting on these crippling premises of the concept, Sinekopova (2006) advocates renewed sensitivity for mediation; not only that performed by media institutions (which have de facto been a staple of research on public deliberation, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995) but particularly of those facilitated by ICTs. Media institutions have been singled out as a hindrance to the enactment of deliberative democratic participation due to their collusion with special interests and political elites (Huspek, 2007b). Normative re-mediations proposed for addressing the inclusiveness of the public sphere have advocated a (self) regulatory response directed at levelling the mediated playing field so that the media attain autonomy from outlying powerful influences and their facilitative function is restored (Habermas, 2006: 419-20; Huspek, 2007b:330).

Alongside this, ICTs have been vested with a transformative role in as far as they facilitate a perpetual rediscovery of the public sphere, a process of rhetorical articulation of individual subjectivities into *publics*. ICTs have been seen to chime with the late-modern rise of reflexive individual identities (Giddens, 1991; Bennett, 2003). By that token, they have been portrayed as closely entwined with reassertions of autonomous publics acting as a corrective on the expressive power differential created by the media (Hauser, 2007). Countervailing claims pertaining to the fragmentation and specialization of deliberative engagement to the exclusion of the apathetic 'average citizen' have been brought into relief by ICTs (Habermas, 2006). Indeed, Muhlberger (2005: 170) has contended that "researchers of the public sphere need to consider the possibility that the public sphere has not grown dramatically because most people simply are not interested in political and social affairs". An attendant delegitimation of participatory opinion formation due to such limitations on inclusiveness (Habermas, 2006) is reviewed below.

The virtual public sphere: access

A pressing question a decade ago was whether the kaleidoscope of political views and interests accommodated by liberal democracies can be faithfully represented in the virtual public sphere. Papacharissi (2002) drew attention to the fragmented nature of the emerging public space, pointing out that it may continue to be exclusionary as much as the bourgeois public sphere was seen to be (Fraser, 1992) whilst concurrently becoming increasingly dominated by powerful commercial interests. Considering the question of access to the virtual public sphere, Papacharissi argued that ICTs remained largely inaccessible to large swathes of the population in rich but particularly in poor countries (see also Norris, 2001). If networked communication has become more affordable and thus more accessible in the last decade, a lingering issue is whether those people who would benefit the most from an expansion in bandwidth for information retrieval and deliberation (Howcroft, 1999), the socio-economically and politically marginalized, have had the possibility to realize that potential.

A series of authors have identified focal points of criticality towards the digital manifestation of the public sphere. They have highlighted a Western-centric (cf. Cammaerts and Van Audenhoven, 2005; Ndlela, 2007), whilst emphasising that particularly gender remained a crucial parameter of uneven access to electronic deliberation (Rakow, 1988; Shifman and Lemish, 2011). This argument has resonated with the critique that the conceptualisation of the public sphere has occurred at the expense of excluded voices due to the equation of the state apparatus with the discursive space of the public sphere (cf. Fraser, 1990; Landes, 1992; McLaughlin, 1993). In this view, the public sphere

has been the official political realm where a succession of powerful political and economic elites preclude the voicing of alternative views which do not reinforce the entrenched distribution of power.

This ostensible alignment between state and the public sphere has been confronted as a question of agency (in terms of the equal opportunities to participate beyond state recognition, Dahlgren, 2009) as well as of physical space. Hampton *et al*. (2010) have argued that whist networked communication may catalyse more extensive participation in the public sphere, it might be at a cost of decreased participation in public spaces such as streets, parks, squares. Contrasting the immateriality of the public sphere, the public spaces that Hampton and his colleagues considered were specifically those urban settings where both planned and chance social interaction may occur. Such social contact may 'minimise the segregation of people based on *lifestyles*: values, opinions, gender, race, ethnicity, stage in the life course and other forms of diversity' (2010:702). Their article examined the use in US public spaces of increasingly more widely available wireless connectivity both through hotspots and 3G networks (see also Nielsen, 2012).

Conversely, it has been proposed that mobile communication may prompt a firm embedding in public space as well as user engagement with strangers if it serves to collect information and to coordinate one's affairs (Campbell and Kwak, 2011). Coordination meant that people were able to organize their affairs on the go, simultaneously increasing their presence in public spaces as well as their availability to converse with strangers (2011:217). Nonetheless, if used for remote relationship maintenance with friends and family (2011:218), mobile technologies appeared to produce the disconnection effect described by Hampton *et al*. (2010). Ultimately, only more empirical research could settle the question of whether the prerequisites for functional deliberative democracy of both individual social network and one's exposure to social diversity (Scheufele *et al*., 2004; Scheufele *et al*., 2006) are met in the networked communication of public spaces; realized through the plurality of both online as well as co-located interactions.

The most prominent users of the mobile technology underpinning public space networked communication are regarded to be young people. Drawing on ICTs, their communication practices are challenging established notions of civic participation (Bennett *et al*., 2011; Loader, 2007; Nixon 2004). Young people's strong presence online could arguably represent an opportunity for civic organisations to induct young citizens into the fundamentals of civic participation. However, notions of what constitutes 'virtuous' citizenship vary between civic organisations that address the younger generation whilst predominant among them seems to be a communication model that rests on top-down content dissemination and an emphasis on participation in institutional politics (Bennett *et al*.,

2011:840). Bennett and his colleagues propose that 'more personally creative and expressive opportunities for civic engagement can be offered to resonate with the lucidity of young people's actions online. To that end, civic organisations would have to tone down an apparent compulsion to closely manage relationships with their *publics'* (emphasis added, 2011:851; see also Ward, 2012)). Ultimately, these organisations may have a better chance of boosting youth civic participation if they are able to make their content available to young people through social media whilst concurrently incentivizing them to socialise around that content (e.g. to distribute and discuss it with peers, see Valenzula *et al*., 2012). Such calls are echoed and amplified by research on pathways towards potential reconnections of the politically peripheral actors that are young women from poor socio-economic backgrounds (Geniets, 2010).

Fragmentation

In spite of searches, such as the one above, for technological fixes to participation in the virtual public sphere, one of its inherent weaknesses may stem from its fragmentation in terms of the breadth and density of outlets that it comprises. Public deliberation has been characterized by an overabundance of information, a great diversity among stakeholders and a mounting mediation of information that targets them (cf. Bennett and Entman, 2001). Indeed, there has been vocal apprehension, including from Habermas, about 'the contents and formats of a degenerating kind of political communication' personified by established media outlets such as radio and television (Habermas, 2006: 422) and their ICT-based franchises. The mediation of information appears to be debilitating for deliberation because of it acting as a driver for fragmentation in the virtual public sphere (cf. Dahlgren, 2000; Holmes, 2002; Keane, 1995; Muhlberger, 2005). To address this issue, theorists have focused on the possibility of variant formations of public sphere(s) rather than a holistic approach to an elusive and normative understanding of a uniform public sphere.

Micro, meso and macro-public spheres have been mapped out by Keen in relation to networked communication growing deeper roots in Western societies (Keane, 1995*). Micro-public spheres* are local spaces and communications exemplary to social movements, *meso-public spheres* typical in the format of the national terrain and the communication flows within it, and finally *macro-public spheres* are coterminous with the public communication sponsored by transnational media corporations. For Keane (1995: 20) "a theory of public life that clings dogmatically to the vision of a unified public sphere in which 'public opinion' and 'the public interest' are defined is a chimera –and that for the sake of democracy it ought now to be jettisoned". Fragmentation thus

seems a condition that marks whichever activity occurs within the public sphere. Concerns regarding the fragmentation of online deliberation have revolved not solely around the noted multiplicity of venues where it occurs but also on observations relating to the selective exposure to ideas and information by individual users (Sunstein, 2001). In contrast to such accounts, it has been proposed that users' selective distribution of their attention is balanced out by the capacity of media outlets to monitor, trend and represent public attention back to individual users (Webster, 2011). Moreover, fragmentation has been viewed as tantamount to a balkanization of online deliberation (Dahan, 2003; Terranova, 2004), generative of factional diatribe rather than reasoned dialogue (c.f. Dahlberg, 2007). Evidence is presented in a number of articles which dispels this apprehension from different angles (Brundidge, 2010; Dahlberg, 2007; Webster, 2011). On the one hand, there may be a germinal link between online news consumption, online political deliberation and diverse networks of political discussion forming chiefly as a result of 'inadvertent' online exposure to competing views (Brundidge, 2010:695). On the other hand, Boulianne's (2009) benchmark meta-analysis considered the impact of antecedent conditions on the use of the internet for political engagement. Her study emphasized the curbing influence of political interest on the use of the internet for political engagement (2009:20, albeit without a definite indication of direction) whilst Brundidge (2010:695) showed that partisanship has similar consequences for diversity in online political discussion[ii]. Put differently, the use of the technology itself may be viewed as catalyst. Answers to the questions of the fragmentation, incivility or one-sidedness (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010) of online deliberation are to be sought outside virtual fora (Curran *et al.*, 2012: 179).

Empirical evidence tellingly points to persisting imbalances in online civic engagement which is skewed towards the more affluent, better educated and socially distinguished of citizens (Bimber, 2003; Dalton, 2006; Loader & Mercea, 2012; Leung, 2009). Socio-economic obstacles to civic participation often seem insurmountable whilst being concurrently compounded by the replication online of chiefly uni-directional models of unresponsive communication. The result is a sobering qualification of assertions that a citizen-producer is superseding the information consumer (Bentivegna, 2006:336). Whilst the predominant image is that of a faltering commitment to political debileration (Muhlberger, 2005: 164), it still appears that the resource-rich and politically savvy are riding the wave of empowering technological change (Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011) leaving the rest of society trailing behind. The resource-rich have been furnished with further means of expression whilst the disenchanted who lack a sense of political efficacy[iii] continue to be by-and-large confined to the margins of online civic deliberations (Dahlberg, 2007; Geniets, 2010). Moreover, whilst the resource-poor seem to have had little to gain from the social turn in ICT design,

the quality of the online political deliberation that largely excludes them has failed to live up to earlier expectations.

Civility

If access and fragmentation are thought to obstruct the manifestation and operation of an inclusive and coherent digital public sphere, then civility needs to be examined in order to understand the conditions within existing digital sphere (s). Politics in the computer-mediated ether has appeared to be no more virtuous than face-to-face or radio and TV broadcasted political debate (Dahlberg, 2007). The democratic credentials of the political discussion that has emerged with networked communication have stayed uncertain. Debate has been characterised by an overlap rather than an intersection of opinions and a lack of civility (see Papacharissi, 2004). A distinction has been drawn between politeness and civility in online deliberation (2004). In Papacharissi's conception, politeness can be summarized as "interaction that flows smoothly" whilst civility would be "interaction that fosters democratic goals" (2004: 262). She stresses the centrality of civility as opposed to politeness for the advancement of a democratic and inclusive public sphere.

Papacharissi's (2004) claim that civility is by and large observed in political deliberation may be due a re-examination given that the contention is based on a study of political Usenet groups conducted approximately a decade ago. A reconsideration of this topic would need to account for the technological transformation exemplified by social media. Social media have eroded anonymity and its ostensible impunity (see Postmes and Brunsting, 2002) instituting a regime of heightened personal disclosure (Baron, 2008). Social media platforms provide an additional level of interconnectivity for people who already share a social connection (Ellison et al., 2007). Social media affordances for interaction through user-generated content, the sorting and viral re-articulation of content created by others (Beer and Burrows, 2007; Beer and Burrows, 2010; Hogan and Quan-Haase, 2010) may have rendered debate on topics of wide concern more porous, inclusive and more open to agonistic engagement that is not directed at consensus-building (Sanderson and Hope-Cheong, 2010). This contention has not been without its critics who have argued that, social media foster polarisation through the mechanisms of social influence that characterise the circulation of content on them (Webster, 2011).

Polarisation is a more extreme condition than fragmentation as it signifies not only a lack of sensitivity for diversity but also outright hostility towards it (2011:57). The danger to which Webster (2011) alludes is that even when peripheral voices of non-consensus-seeking 'subaltern counter publics' (Fraser, 1992) reach a critical mass, the public attention afforded to them is by default filtered out by the social recommendation mechanisms that underpin social media. Nonetheless,

before polarisation becomes the subject of a moral panic, it remains to be evidenced not just as an aggregate measure but as predominant at the level of individual 'media repertoires', i.e. individual patterns of content selection across media sources (Webster, 2011:59).

In its turn, polarisation may be viewed as a normative concept that revolves around an assumption that extreme views have to be reined in through rational deliberation directed at consensus-building and implicitly the maintenance of the status-quo defined by liberal-democratic political institutions (Dahlberg, 2007). Contrary to this view, an emphasis has been laid on power asymmetries derived chiefly from socio-economic location which 'influence who can speak, what can be said and how interaction is undertaken' (2007:532). In this line, Dahlberg argues that the public sphere rests on an exclusionary notion of a rational individual who holds the requisite socio-economic and cultural capital for making informed contributions to consensus-oriented deliberations. Thus, in spite of the best efforts, the virtual public sphere would appear irreparably inaccessible to the underprivileged.

Conversely, dissident voices that can overcome the socio-economic barrier may act as a check and perhaps a remedy to any levelling tendencies associated with consensus-building. Dahlberg, however, is of the view that such dissident voices are difficult to articulate online in the dominant outlets owned by business corporations. An example of telling exclusionary practices may be the ranking logic under which search engines operate that results in the foregrounding of established views (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010:155). Whilst we sympathize with this outlook, we would not discard the possibility that dissident re-appropriations may already be at play on corporate-owned social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Google+ etc.). For instance, Segerberg and Bennett (2011) allude to the capacity Twitter hashtags furnished protest coalitions, who had differing levels of resources available to them, to organize and publicize their views and actions on climate change ahead of the 2009 UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen. Power differentials in the virtual public sphere are the final substantive topic reviewed in this chapter.

Power Dynamics

Inquiring into power differentials in the virtual public sphere, one is presented with an array of concerns. They range from apprehension about the strengthening grip of business corporations (including the established media, Bennett el al., 2004) on the communication infrastructure (Goldberg, 2011) to scepticism about a trickling up of opinions and demands on public officials

(Wright and Street, 2007), or to concerns about entrenched journalistic gatekeeping that prioritizes elite accounts whilst sidelining dissident voices (Bennett et al., 2004). Two major impediments seem to come in the way of an expansive operation of a networked public sphere: firstly, the normalisation of network space into offline orders and secondly a twinned distortion and overload of information (Friedland *et al.*, 2006).

Primarily, networks tend to favour those with the capacity to attract the most nodes, a phenomenon otherwise known as a power law (cf. Barabási, 2002, 2011). According to this thesis, the dynamics inherent in networks are more favourable towards already strong nodes in the network or socially prominent actors as well as nodes which have exhibited strong pulling power outside network topology. Online, corporate media actors-established or emerging ones-attract the largest plurality of interest to their websites (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2009; Webster, 2011). There is a "ghostly presence, often left unmentioned, of antidemocratic corporate power in the U.S. that commodifies everything, including the ubiquitous technologies driving cyberspace" (Giroux, 2011: 23).

Thus, a noted convergence of media formats (Jenkins, 2006) together with the profit-making drive which underpins commercial social media (Goldberg, 2011; Halavais, 2008) has resulted in their users being objectified as labourers in a capitalist informational mode of production. Instead of a potential to be realized, participation is a precondition to entering a market-based public sphere which operates in favour of those already endowed with economic, social or cultural capital (Webster, 2011). Thus, 'far from liberating the passive consumer from control, participation may simply install control on a 'deeper level' under the guise of self-expression (2011:743)'. Put differently, the changing relationship between production and consumption of online content can be re-viewed as a shift in labour to consumers of online content who are also burdened with the task of content creation as well engagement in in civil deliberation.

Critical voices increasingly therefore contend that the communication architecture of social media, erected on user-generated content creation, seems to suffer from similar ailments to those tracked by earlier forays into the design of platforms for democratic deliberation (Wright and Street, 2007). Wright and Street posited that rather than empowering, technologies for online deliberation such as chat fora replicated entrenched power relations. Others agree, with some qualifications. The young and resource-rich appear to be the most avid producers of user-generated content (Leung, 2009:1341), though these individuals may not be the highly educated and consequently politically most active of the online demographic (c.f. Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011). Those content producers also hold the view that they can have an influence on political institutions (Leung, 2009:1342) exhibiting a sense of external efficacy which was not apparent in previous explorations

into the purchase of networked communication on political engagement (Coleman *et al.*, 2008). Ultimately, these politically efficacious individuals seem to be no less than another emergent elite joining the ranks of the established and most competent of democratic citizens.

Whilst those empowered by the technology may be the more resourceful of social actors (Leung, 2009), alternative intermediators such as NGO or activist groups may nevertheless rise to the challenge of channelling participation in both the virtual public sphere and in the life of the polity. NGOs "offer the knowledgeable and critical voice needed to inform and direct the passion of the street and the colourful, but cluttered, multivocality of online discussions" (Bakardjieva, 2012:76; see also Ndlela, 2007). Thereby, power differentials may come to be offset through networked communication at times of agonistic social upheaval that on the face of it seem to upset rather than bolster consensus politics.

Conclusion

The relevance of a discussion on the relation between the internet and the public sphere is undeniable; according to Dahlgren (2005: 148) this theme "has a permanent place on research agendas and in intellectual inquiry for the foreseeable future". The significance of exploring the potential of deliberation across spheres and sphericules remains highly pertinent. In the constant flux that is becoming a trademark of networked communication, the last decade has seen the mainstreaming of ubiquitous and instantaneous communication by political and commercial institutions, groups and individuals. On the one hand, networked communication allows for anytime-anywhere communication which can create a havoc of civic communication. On the other hand, it has been expected to countervail the reach and prominence of influential agents. Nonetheless, and in spite of the so-called revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East, or the protests in Europe and North America, the literature on networked activism remains pessimistic on the question of the galvanizing potential of social media for effective action on political institutions (c.f. Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Fenton and Barassi, 2011).

Reflecting back on this review of the field, we propose the following avenues for future empirical research. A more extensive treatment may be afforded to the question of a potential trade-off between engagement in the virtual public sphere and involvement in the material world in which the networked communication unfolds. Habermas (1989) firmly grounded the public sphere in locales of bourgeois sociality, cafés, clubs, societies, salons. An ostensible detachment from the material coordinates of the networked communication has thus far received mixed evaluations

when weighed against expectations for civic participation (see Morozov, 2011 on his portrayal of Internet-based political participation as *slacktivism*). As a result of this, contextual conditions (both spatial ones as well as material and symbolic resources) are essential in the reconsideration of the deliberative possibilities of communication technologies. This is especially relevant in the case of the allowances of social media for social and political change.

Even though social media are becoming increasingly dominant as destinations for people's online activities in the West (Nielsen, 2010), attention to the implications of social media usage for deliberative democracy seems marginal in the reviewed journals. As waves of dissidence splash digitally and physically across politically or economically repressive regimes, the tendency to exaggerate their potential can be exclusive of the conditions which underline their existence (Gladwell, 2010). The theorisation of social media cannot be decoupled from the socio-political, economic and physical coordinates of their usage (Howard and Parks, 2012).

If normative preoccupations associated with the public sphere are to continue to inform research, renewed attention to places and practices of mundane communication may perhaps stimulate not only reflections on the multiplicity of public spheres but also the interplay between exclusionary and empowering forces in civil society. Exemplars for this approach might be Hampton and Gupta's (2008) or Hartmann's (2009) studies on Wi-Fi cafes peering into emerging user cultures. Questions relative to a layered location (in physical space, along a private-public continuum, in relation to the social attributes of a place) of communication are highlighted therein to sensitize communication scholars to 'the embedded nature of media use' (2009:432).

As a reflection of the studies it considered, this chapter is largely silent about non-Western public spheres. An encouragement of analyses that dwell on non-Western developments or compare them with Western counterparts could perhaps inquire into practices that facilitate access in lower internet-penetration contexts whilst also scrutinizing the efficacy of participation in subaltern public spheres. In countries as China such participation whilst civil may not bolster perceptions of political efficacy and thus fail to motivate active engagement (c.f. Papacharissi, 2002).

We would also propose a more substantial investment in empirical research to simultaneously anchor and re-inspire the ideal of deliberative democracy. Such rekindling would occur in a universe where power differentials, hurdles to inclusiveness and norms of civility are contested and rearticulated discursively as well as through distributed socio-technological play with social media. We see particularly approaches at the cusp of sociology and historiography as being suitable for this purpose. By virtue of their embeddedness in lived social networks, social media seem to be suited for a reinforcement of social norms, including those that foster civility in public discourse. Concurrently, they may occasion new attempts at resistance to such normalization by

being deployed, for example, in pervasive games aimed at subverting a public culture increasingly based on surveillance (Geesin, 2010).

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[i] These journals were: The Communication Monographs, The Communication Review, Communication Theory, Continuum: The Journal of Media and Cultural Studies, Critical Studies in Media and Communication, European Journal of Communication, Human Communication Research, International Journal of Mobile Communications, Journal of Applied communication Research, Journal of Communication, Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Mass Communication and Society, Media International Australia, Media, Culture & Society, New Media & Society, Political Communication, Public Culture, Television & New Media.
[ii] Yet, results seem contradictory in regard to a positive effect of online news consumption on engagement perhaps due to variability in explanatory models (Boulianne, 2009) but also because of the breadth of the spectrum of activities signifying civic participation (Kziazek, Malthouse, Webster, 2010).

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[iii] Coleman et al. (2008:771-2) define political efficacy as 'people's beliefs in their ability to understand and participate effectively in governance, be it at the national, local or more immediate levels'. The authors go on to argue that perceptions of effectiveness are closely connected with the sensitivity that political institutions have for citizen involvement in political decision-making.