New Technologies and Deliberation:
Internet as a virtual public sphere or a democratic utopia?

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Abstract.

Contemporary democratic theories have sought alternatives to make democracy more participatory, approaching voters from government decisions. In this sense, deliberative democracy has emerged as an alternative, which emphasizes the ideal of democracy and give citizens the opportunity to deliberate rationally about the decisions that concern them.

Towards a better understanding of the democratic process, in which the ideal of deliberative democracy becomes relevant, the concept of Habermasian public sphere is highlighted as the expanded space from society, where citizens deliberate on the public issues.

At the same time, new technologies of communication and information have grown as resources that have the potential to strengthen democracy. Interactive and multifunctional, they offer a wealth and exchange of information, offering new possibilities for decentralized participation and connection between citizens and politicians.

However, in much of the literature, it is common to overemphasize the technological dimensions and settle, deterministically, an association between the potential of new technologies and the revitalization of democratic institutions and practices.
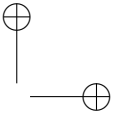
This article discusses whether new technologies of communication and information, and specially the Internet, can contribute effectively to strengthening democracy. We argue that the concept of public sphere need a review, perhaps a review that abandons the assumptions of Habermasian public sphere, because changes in modern society and the technical revolutions of recent decades have generated significant changes in the social field.

We also argue that Internet does not create a public sphere, because it lacks essential features like the debate argued with the use of reason, collective interests above individual abilities to understand and hear different voices, political engagement, among others.

In the other hand, opportunities offered by the network should be seen so associated with the motivations of social actors themselves and the procedures of communication between them (Maia, 2002, p. 65).
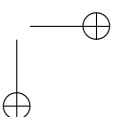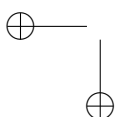
The paper explores first the model of deliberative democracy as a two track model. Secondly, it outlines the normative concept of the public sphere and its basis ideas, namely the rationality, reciprocity, equality and non-coercion, aspects that should dominate a space for public deliberation. The third part for discussion shows how the Internet couldn't fit into this concept of public sphere.

Keywords: deliberation; democracy; public sphere; Internet; Habermas.

Introduction.

Since the mid-90s, the topic of new media, and especially the Internet, was introduced in communication studies and politics, bringing with it great expectations regarding the renewal of the possibilities of democratic participation. Some authors have even argued that the new media technically recreated the possibilities of direct democracy. In this context, deliberative theorists begin to face the Internet associated with a number of possibilities to increase the quality and quantity of public deliberation and the public sphere online.

However, if it is true that the new media offer new opportunities for citizens' participation, particularly because they differ in very stark ways of previous media, we can not talk on the Internet as a public sphere or an instrument of democratization without first consider the characteristics of an area of public discussion, taking into account the ideals of deliberative democracy in the context of contemporary society. Thus, based on the idea of a deliberative democracy, in this paper we consider important conceptual challenges about the significance of the public sphere in the context of new media, but also the tensions over who participates and how this so-called new public sphere is linked to the ideals of a deliberative democracy. This particular research thus attempt to determine whether the Internet meets Habermas' criteria of a public sphere and whether our notion of public sphere should be reshaped with the introduction of new communication technologies.

The emergence of Deliberative Democracy in Democratic Theory.

The decline of political participation, a loss of voter confidence in representative institutions and a participatory apathy revealed in the lack of interest by citizens in public affairs (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Putman, 2000), are some of the main problems which have raised, in the last decades, a shift in political studies and particularly in studies on democracy. In this context, all over the world there have been
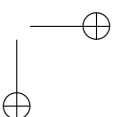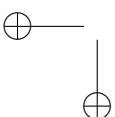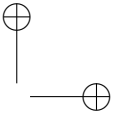
further discussions about how to revitalize democracy, because there is growing concern that representative democracy is undergoing a crisis (Arteton, 1987; Cohen e Arato, 1992; Giddens, 1994; Manin, 1997; Coleman e Gotze, 2001; 2005; Castells, 1997), focused mainly in relations between the civil sphere and the sphere of political representatives. In fact, we believe that there is indeed a "crisis", not of the representative democracy, but only one of its values: the participation.
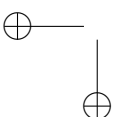
It is in this context that we can understand the emergence of the theory of democratic deliberation "as one cure to address this malaise of modern democracy" (e.g., Barber, 1984; Fishkin, 1991; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). The deliberative conception of democracy has been developed in opposition, or at least as an alternative, to the dominant conceptions of democracy based on an elitist epistemological model, in which individual preferences are aggregated through the voting mechanism, the ultimate expression that allows citizens' participation (Schumpeter, 1984).

Thus, deliberative democracy has been highlighted as a model which implies that political decision-making is or should be "talk-centric" rather than "vote-centric" (Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Chambers, 1999). This means that deliberative democracy refers to the importance of restoring participation in forums of civil society with space for citizens' involvement on issues that concern them and their communities (Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1997), i.e., is a normative political theory that assumes rational communicative behavior and voluntary participation in public affairs on the part of citizens.

> "A form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives) justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching decisions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future" (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p. 7).

In the sense adopted here, deliberation is not seen as decision-making that takes place at a given time, but as the social process of offer and examine arguments, involving two or more persons to seek cooperative solutions in situations of conflict or divergence. Is a process that requires a joint activity in which actors listen to each other, reasonably justify their positions, show mutual respect, and are willing to re-evaluate and eventually revise their initial preferences through a process of discourse about competing validity claims (Habermas, 1997; Chambers, 1995, 1999; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996).

However, the roots of this conception of democracy are not recent. From Aristotle to Burke, through Rousseau and Mill, there are many classical figures in the history of political ideas that the various deliberative democratic trends suggest as sources of inspiration (Silva, 2004). But, while all of them advocate the deliberative method, in a greater or lesser degree, they were far from being proponents of a form of deliberative democracy with the features that we have today. Indeed, the first time that the notion
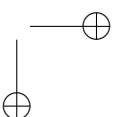
of deliberation is articulated in the context of a modern conception of democracy only happens in the first half of the twentieth century, in works such as *The Public and Its Problems* by John Dewey (1927).

But it is especially in recent decades, from the work of Joseph Bessette (1980), that the term "deliberative democracy" gained a prominent place in democratic political theory and in academic studies. In general, deliberative democracy distinguishes itself from other democratic theories by the assumptions that are at its base: its insistence on the notion of "rational debate" as a political procedure, rather than the notion of "compromise between divergent interests"; instead of a private act such as voting, deliberative democracy bet a public act as a political act par excellence: the free and public exchange of arguments.

In this sense, Joshua Cohen and Jurgen Habermas can be considered the theorists who fixed the foundations of modern deliberative democracy (Silveirinha, 2005). The Habermasian perspective of deliberative democracy lies in the tension between the republican model and the liberal model. The German philosopher indicates a model of democracy that, on the one hand, does not abdicate the strong interaction and discourse between citizens and representatives to the formation of opinion and, secondly, that recognize rights, freedoms and individual claims. In this context, deliberative democrats, influenced by Habermas, have long emphasized the public sphere as perhaps the most important space for deliberation (Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 1990). Thus, the deliberative nature of democracy underscores the fundamental idea of public sphere, whose emphasis is on the need of participation from civil society in the decision-making process.

In this framework, the concept of public sphere as the locus of the debate appears to be central. The purpose of the next part in this paper is just exploring the concept of public sphere and its implications for democratic theory, specifically to theories of deliberative democracy. We will also pay particular attention to Habermas's formulations, especially the discussions around the concept of public sphere, which has been suffering throughout their works an ongoing review.

The concept of public sphere and its implications for democratic theory.

In his classic work, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962 [1989]), Jürgen Habermas introduces the concept of public sphere as central to understanding the pillars of modern democracy. The author describes, in an historical perspective, the rise of a group of citizens who gathered with the purpose of discussing state affairs and issues of common interest.

"Gathering in the salons and cafeterias of the eighteenth century, and disseminating
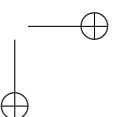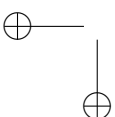
> their ideas through political pamphlets and the small press, the bourgeois formed a public which, although deprived of power to govern, had the capacity to criticize and formulate recommendations to guide the exercise of political power" (Maia, 2007, p. 71).

At this point, the public sphere was configured as a defense mechanism (Gomes, 2008) of the bourgeoisie in relation to the state, with the primary aim of promoting discussion on matters of common concern. The work of Habermas is still considered the foundation of contemporary public sphere theories, and most theorists cite it when discussing their own theories.

> The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor (Habermas, 1989, p. 27).

In his historical analysis, Habermas points out three so-called "institutional criteria" as preconditions for the emergence of the new public sphere: the disregard of status in this space; public discussions on topics and issues that hitherto had not been discussed, ensuring that there is a domain of common concern; and inclusivity or accessibility, which means that everyone had to be able to participate.

This notion of public sphere, as an open forum for debate among a community of citizens with equal political status, raised, however, many problems and a considerable number of critics, with the core criticism directed towards the above stated "institutional criteria". Feminists as Mary Ryan (1991), Marion Fleming (1993) and Nancy Fraser (1993) among others, began to accuse Habermas of have idealized a bourgeois public sphere that outlines a scenario that does not take into account the mechanisms of exclusion, material inequalities, the restrictions of gender and the class division. Fraser argues that the bourgeois public sphere was in fact constituted by a "number of significant exclusions" discriminating women and lower social strata of society. Also Jane Mansbridge, in its investigation revisiting Habermas' historical description of the public sphere, notes several relevant ways in which deliberation can serve as a mask for dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates. Fraser also notes the difficulty in defining what matters generally conceived as private that become public and of "common concern".

But beyond the feminist criticism, other authors have also criticized the fact that the German sociologist focuses their theory in a period of limited democracy and liberal practices, features of the nineteenth century.

In the second part of the Structural Transformation, in the late 19th century, Habermas argues that bourgeois public sphere goes through a series of significant changes, with private interests gained political roles and control the state and media. The state
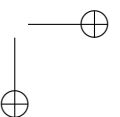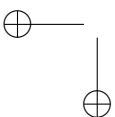
will thus play a greater role in the private domain, thereby hindering the division, hitherto clear, between State and civil society. As the public sphere declined, citizens were gradually reduced to passive clients unconcerned to issues of the public[1].

The limitations of the idealized public sphere in the nineteenth century have contributed to the various reformulations that the concept of public sphere has suffered, particularly given the complex and pluralistic societies. Habermas takes up the idea of public sphere, focusing this time not to analyze the ideological origins and history of the concept, but in considering how this sphere could function as a mean of legitimization of political power, a sphere of mediation between the State and private interests. In other words, Habermas wanted to reflect on the possibility of the discussions that took place in the public sphere legitimize the political decisions. The idea of a public sphere as a locus of discussion would thus not be understood as an institution, or as a place, because it refers to citizens' communication uses, particularly with regard to the argumentative exchange.

In this way, Habermas focuses on the discourse ethics, which are constituted by a set of universalistic and practical guidelines enabling to overcome a process of open and reflexive discourse. "Legitimate decision does not represent the will of all, but is one that results from deliberation of all" (Manin, 1987, p. 352). He expresses unambiguous conditions for reaching universal norms through discourse, i.e., in the public sphere one must be able to express his opinion freely and justify it rationally, one must have free access to the public sphere, there must not be a hierarchy present, and those in the public sphere must have equal footing in there participation.

These procedural rules are in Habermasian terminology commonly known as the criteria of the ideal speech situation. "Everyone with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse, to question any assertion whatever, to express his attitudes, desires, and needs. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in" (Habermas, 1990, p. 89)

These criteria of the ideal speech situation aim to reflect about those weaknesses who were diagnosed in bourgeois public sphere, including issues related to dominance of some groups, exclusion and definition of common concern. However, these criteria are a set of ideals, which is no guarantee of their applicability. Thus, not without reason that this work want to explores how new technologies of communication and information, and specially Internet, which have grown as resources that have the potential to strengthen democracy, can effectively constitutes as a virtual public sphere, tanking into account Habermas' strict criteria.

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[1] This historical transformation is firmly grounded in the Frankfurt School's (Horkheimer and Adorno) analysis of the culture industry, in which giant corporations take over the public sphere and transform it from a sphere of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity. Public opinion shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion, and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts.

From Deliberative Democracy to Communicative Action: the possibilities of the Internet.

As we seen before, deliberative democracy defining as the "(. . .) democratic association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens" (Cohen in Bohman and Rehg, 1997, p. 72) has its basis in a fundamental notion of public sphere directly connected with the discourse ethics, where the ideal speech situation in which "every subject with the competence to speak and act" means that is to be allowed access to the public discourse, that is, without being exposed to any type of coercion. To Habermas (1996, 307), public discourse is formed and articulated not in one singular discourse, but it results from a network of publics having fluid temporal, social, and substantive boundaries, which are securely embedded within a freedom of speech and association.

In this sense, Habermas thereby follows the model derived by the sociologist Bernard Peters (1993), in which the political power-circuit follows a centre periphery structure, where the centre is constituted of formal political institutions that have direct influence on collectively decisions, and the periphery encompasses the multitude of publics that stand in direct, or indirect, relation to the centre. Thus, to be legitimate, decisions "must be steered by communication flows that start at the periphery and pass through the sluices of democratic and constitutional procedures situated at the entrance to the parliamentary complex or the courts..." (Habermas, 1996, p. 356).

The media plays, in this context, an obviously crucial role in explicitly articulating the public voice from the periphery (here understood as the public sphere) and the centre, stimulating further public deliberation on issues of civic interest. "Expectations to peripheral networks are directed at the capacity to perceive, interpret and present society-wide problems in a way that is both attention catching and innovative" (Habermas, 1996, p. 358).

These expectations gained, accordingly to many researchers, a new ground with new media, and especially with Internet, changing the traditional "centre-periphery" model through those who are appointed as its main potential.

Firstly, its global coverage and penetration can contributes to an increased ability of people to engage in public discourse. Until then, there were cases in which certain issues were not of interest in local or national context and because there was lack of interested. The Internet potentially increases the probability of finding not only spaces dedicated to issues in virtual spaces, but also interest from other people about them. From this point of view, any subject may virtually anywhere be articulated as one of "common concern". Its global coverage also provides opportunities for minority voices, or excluded, voices not normally heard because they belong to groups, classes, people who are socially marginalized in the mainstream of communication.
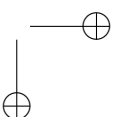
Secondly, Internet can lead to the creation of a certain anonymity of it users, once they may speak out more freely on controversial issues, without fearing, intimidation or coercion. Thus promotes freedom of speech and freedom of association, and allows for more equal conditions for participation in the debate since the inequalities (class, gender, rhetorical skill of the participants) have certain effacement (Barglow, 1994; Reingold, 2000)[2]. On the other hand, the asynchronous nature of virtual communication modes changing allows the users to choose when they want to participate, without duration or an hour, once they can read a contribution at one moment and submit a posting or a comment later. Moreover, there is no need for physical presence of the interlocutors

The asynchronous nature also fits the necessary conditions of rational discourse in the exchange, it can be said that the network environment is ripe for this kind of debate, since it tends to be based on a dialogic activity. There may be a constant exchange of papers and speakers. The dialogue partners can question and enter an opinion and express their own wishes and needs. No participant in the debate can arbitrarily shut down the process of interpretation and evaluation of comprehensive views of partners.

Overcoming the limitations of space and time, "everyone can communicate with any other individual, not just the city, region or state, but lately from anywhere in the world. With the barriers of time and space eliminated, a dialogue genuine online is possible between any number of individuals who wants exchange ideas" (Barnett, 1997, p. 194).

It is easy to see that the characteristics of the Internet represent a change from the previous media and an apparently more personalized communication, with a greater potential for interactivity, allowing a new relationship between individuals and communities, and between them and politics. Furthermore, new media in general, and Internet in particular, seems to meet all basic requirements of Habermas's normative theory about the democratic public sphere: it is a universal way, anti-hierarchical, complex and demanding. Because it offers universal access, non-coercive communication, freedom of expression, unrestricted agenda, participation outside of traditional political institutions and because it generates public opinion through processes of discussion, the Internet seems the most ideal situation of communication (Buchsteiner, 1997, p. 251). In many regards, the Internet seems to approximate and facilitate Habermas' institutional criteria better than the bourgeois public sphere. But, one may ask, are the virtual spaces of the Internet really as free as they seem?

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[2] This should be considered in context of Habermas' institutional criteria on inclusivity and disregard of status.
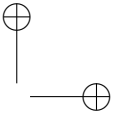
Internet as a public sphere?

The notion of public sphere, in the context of a model of deliberative democracy implies, as we saw, a discussion space lined by inclusion, equality, communicative rationality and non-coercion. In this regard, Internet seems to meet all these requirements, providing a range of possibilities to a more democratic access, non-coercive communication and freedom of expression. Thus, the literature on the Internet and participation continues by presenting large lists of democratic gains of the new media. However, these theories quickly began to overemphasize the technological dimensions and establish, deterministically, an association between the potential of new technologies and the revitalization of democratic institutions and practices, which has contributed to the emergence of a number of studies that show a set of constraints and deficits on the Internet, in terms of its contribution to modern democracy.

First and foremost, concerns arise with the resources constraints, namely access to the Internet that is generally associated with the term "digital divide" (Norris, 2001). This understanding stresses the unequal distribution of "digital infrastructures", strongly correlated with class and status, an argument which states that, at least at this level, it seems to reflect and reinforce inequality, rather than overcome (Wilhelm, 1999, 2000; Milner, 1999; Tsagarousianou, 1998). The so-called "digital divide" which encompasses the material access, language, knowledge (to use relevant communication software) and attitude to lead with technology (that is, the perception of not being capable to understand or adapt to the technology at hand). Thus, revisiting the standards of the ideal speech situation, specifically the first principle, which states that "everyone with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in the discourse", we immediately realize that access is not universal. On the other hand, the issue of participation is not simply about the possibilities of access to technology. Participation also raises the issue with the discursive formation of will, i.e., the existence of a political culture conducive to the development of discursive potential (Maia, 2008, p. 285). Thus, the broader access to technology does not guarantee per se, an increased interest in public debate on issues. Motivation, interest and availability of the citizens to participate in the debates are crucial aspects. This means that opportunities offered by the network should be seen so associated with the motivations of social actors themselves and the procedures of communication between them (Maia, 2002, p. 65)[3].

On the other hand, social divides and group polarization is common on the Internet and social divides are created by the web's ability to personalize content. The web is a place that is quite vulnerable to social fragmentation because the more easily

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[3] "Recent studies have shown that the main obstacles to the achievement of the determination, which presupposes a discursive resolution of problems affecting the common interest, usually stem from a form of political apathy, not obstacles to freedom of expression or communication" (Maia, 2008, p. 285).

people receive information, the more they are interested only in what they are already interested in (Sunstein, 2001). Therefore, the group polarization is more likely and more extreme on the web than anywhere else and this is damaging to a democracy because mutual understanding becomes more difficult when people do not listen to others who have different or opposing views (Soe, 2004).

In this sense, taking into account the conditions for the existence of a "critical-rational discussion", it takes more than a plurality of voices joined in the same space, but instead requires partners to build, in a coordinated and cooperative manner, a shared understanding on a common matter. People should express what they have in mind, should hear what others have to say and respond to questions and inquiries. This, in turn, requires an attitude of mutual respect. Wilhelm (1999; 2000), Hill and Hughes (1998), Dahlberg (2001), between other, through empirical research, specifically sought to examine whether there is the possibility of a debate with this condition in the space of online discussion, and concluded that most participants express their own opinion, not having a debate itself. Thus, Internet and other new media facilitate access to information, may allow the expression of different voices, but do not determine the procedure for inter-communication from the point of view of critical-rational reflection (Davis, 2005; Maia, 2002). It is unrealistic to expect that citizens are fully prepared and ready to rationally specify their own needs (Benhabib, 1996, Gutmann and Thompson, 1996).

Another aspect seen as a potential of the Internet, may also be seen as problematic, taking into account the characteristics of the public sphere. From the perspective of the debate, the anonymity first may give rise to a new reinvigorated possibility in which "occupation, education and social status (. . .) lose significance, bringing pure exchange of arguments to the fore" (Jensen, 2003, p. 351). However, anonymity is also associated with negative aspects, once contrary to expectations, "endless fruitless dialogues were characterized by irresponsibility, hate speech and decline of debate culture" (Jensen, 2003, p. 358).

With central theoretical foundations of Deliberative Democracy established, and the most fundamental Habermasian concepts in place, we discuss the possibilities of the new media in relation to democratic deliberation, but we also have saw a number of limitations of this medium, especially given that those are the ideal conditions for the existence of an area of public debate. The particular model of argumentation, as presented in the ideal speech situation of Habermas, are never fully realized in the real world because they have numerous and inevitable limitations as we saw. Thus, if the ideal speech should be seen only as regulative principle, and it is wrong to adopt this model in a very literal understanding of the dynamics of public debate, then, the Internet itself, while does have democratizing potential, it often fails as a public sphere in practice.

Is in this context that we argue, that Internet' potential for serving as a public
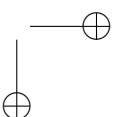
sphere should lead us to the need to rethink their stance of how they look at the communicative breakthroughs of the Internet and the classic model of the public sphere theory. Rather than negate the Internet as a public sphere entirely, we should understand that the Internet is reinventing a public sphere different from the one Habermas envisioned.
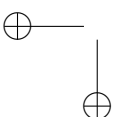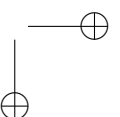
Rethinking the public sphere in the context of the Internet and Democratic Deliberation.

In the last years, while some scholars agree there can never truly be one virtual public sphere, according to Habermas' criteria, more and more scholars are beginning to rethink new criteria for determine what constitutes the public sphere. These reflections are due, largely, to the emergence of the Internet and how it has transformed Habermas' original criteria.

Dahlberg (2007), as Tranz, argues that rather than discard the public sphere, we have to introduce another public sphere understanding. The old concept of the public sphere, focused on Habermas, as we highlight in the beginning of this work, no longer works, especially if we consider the changes in modern society and the technical revolutions of recent decades that have generated significant changes in the social field. There is no longer a public sphere as conceived and defined by Habermas, in which equality was the essence and objectives and demands were common (Poster, 2001; Maia, 2002, 2006). The mutual agreement among discourse in the public sphere, that for some, leads to peaceful democratic deliberation, can simply means a repetition of the same voices.

On the other hand, the virtual spaces are programmed and conditioned by a control system, what means that there can be no assurance, that collective decisions or agreement represent the will of the masses. Furthermore, there are considered public spaces to discuss issues of interest to the participants, but not necessarily public or collective issues. Coming to a virtual public sphere, a space dedicated to communication in their public sense, in which all are able and have critical resources, economic, educational and technological means to participate is a utopia, an idealism. Even the birthplace of democracy has given voices to all needs, nor a society increasingly focused on capital may reach an egalitarian public sphere, universal and non-coercive.

Having said that, we want to highlight, in the context of this rethinking of new criteria for determine what constitutes the new public sphere, two main aspects. First, we must make it clear the need to preserve that space for the communication and public deliberation as an essential condition for strengthening democracy and interpersonal relationships. However, we can no longer talk of a public space given a set of ideal criteria, which we know in advance that we will not find. It takes more empi-

rical study on the actual discussions that take place in various spheres of the Internet, trying to identify the existence of a process of interaction between different users. Basically, this is about starting from the experiences that take place in the reality (in this context in the virtual spaces) and then construct a notion of a space of public dialogue, and not trying to analyze the reality through predetermined normative criteria. Secondly, it is certainly not the Internet that can solve the problems of our democracy, nor any technology that can guarantee the conditions for a public discussion and a perfect deliberative process. None of this will happen without an active engagement of citizens. For the existence of a public sphere, the actions are essential, the interactions, exchanges of ideas and experiences. Internet alone does not transform the citizen, neither endorse nor promote critical thinking, rational argumentation, or a fruitful debate. Although places with real potential the virtual spaces are no more than simulations arenas of freedom within a limited space of the operating parameters. The network creates an imaginary effect suggests that the reality does not exist outside the boundaries imposed by artificial parameters. But that reality exists, and thinking in a virtual public sphere that begins and ends in virtuality, and never goes against reality, trying to contribute effectively to the process of decision making can be a signal that we must realize a balance of power for the digital age: between the technology and the real decision making process in the real world.

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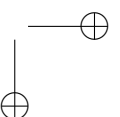
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