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Blogs, online forums, public spaces and the extreme right in North Belgium

Bart Cammaerts

You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilisation from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass. A touch here, a push there, and you bring back the reign of Saturn (Buchan, 1916).

1. INTRODUCTION

As critical researchers we often tend to look at the progressive emancipatory resistance movements first and foremost, and in doing so we ignore the extensive use of the internet (as well as other media) by non-progressive reactionary movements, be it the radical and dogmatic Catholic movement, the fundamentalist Muslim movement or the extreme right – post-fascist – movement. As Kahn and Kellner (2004: 94) quite rightly point out: *'the internet is a contested terrain, used by Left, Right, and Center of both dominant cultures and subcultures in order to promote their own agendas and interests'*. A notable exception to this pre-dominant focus on progressive politics is Atton (2004) who addresses the use of alternative (new) media by the extreme-right movement in the UK. Downing et al. (2001: 89) also make the distinction between democratic and repressive radical media.

This chapter explores a case that illustrates the way in which the 'global' internet serves to some as a way to bypass 'national' legislation voted to prevent the incitement of racial hatred and discrimination against minorities. More specifically, a number of hate discourses in a blog and an online forum will be analysed in a period when a number of serious incidents shook the Belgian public opinion and caused very extreme discourses to be ventilated. This will be related to recent debates regarding the internet and public spaces, rationality versus passions, as well as the distinction between agonism and antagonism (Mouffe, 1999).

In this chapter the focus will be on so-called anti-public spaces, '*placing themselves at the political extremes [...] challeng[ing] or question[ing] basic democratic values*' (Cammaerts, 2007: 73).

Inevitably this also brings into question cultural differences in relation to how absolute freedom of speech is, and how or to what extent a balance is struck between different rights, including respect for and recognition of difference and the right not to be discriminated against.

2. AN ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE OR PUBLIC SPACES ONLINE

The rise of the internet as an interactive space, potentially global in reach, has led to an increasing number of scholars asserting the relevance or indeed irrelevance of the internet for the promotion of a democratic public sphere and for the facilitation of deliberation (Wilhelm, 2000; Gimmler, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001; Young, 2001; Poster, 2001; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Dean, 2003; Dahlgren, 2005; Cammaerts, 2005). This has clearly re-invigorated debates regarding the public sphere and linked to that the potentials of the internet to foster a public sphere or public spaces beyond state and market that facilitate deliberation.

Villa (1992: 712) describes the public sphere as '*a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action*'. He thus explicitly links up the public sphere concept with the deliberative model of democracy. From this deliberative opinion-making perspective, reaching a consensus becomes a process involving different actors, of communication and dialogue, not a procedure to count personal preferences. It is also informed by the rational argumentative debate, the respect for difference and the ability to change views based on rational counter-arguments. The internet is by some perceived as an ideal platform to realise deliberation. Coleman and Gøtze (2001: 17) for instance assert that the internet '*makes manageable largescale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation*'.

Contrary to this, much of empirical research into the use of the internet to facilitate deliberation or public debate tends to counter these rather optimistic claims that the internet stimulates the emergence of an online public sphere. Regarding the potentials of the internet in view of democracy and public debate, Norris (2001: 12) speaks of a democratic divide between '*those who do and do not use the multiple political resources available on the internet for civic engagement*'. This creates imbalances in terms of representation, whereby those that participate in the offline, also do so online. This leads Dahlberg (2001: 10) to conclude that participa-

tion in online public debates *'is, in fact, both quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by those already powerful offline (politically active, educated, white, males).'* More recently, King (2006: 26) confirmed that *'those people participating in political issues on the Internet were highly educated and already highly politically engaged persons'*.

In addition, many scholars challenge or at least question the potential of the internet to facilitate and enable (rational) deliberation. A recurrent observation is that much debate on the internet tends to take place between like-minded (male) participants situated in homogenic ideological frameworks and engaging in, what Davies (1999: 162) calls, *'opinion reinforcement'*. Wilhelm (2000: 89) and others, describe this phenomenon as *'homophily'*. On the contrary, ideologically heterogeneous unmoderated spaces for debate, while being more open, are often confronted with flame-wars between (anonymous) participants (Eum, 2005; Cammaerts, 2005: 70).

While many proponents of digital culture and technological advancement seem to argue that the internet has all the requirements to re-establish a Habermassian public sphere, others, such as many authors cited above argue the contrary or are more cautious in their assessment. However, maybe the real question here is therefore not whether the internet constitutes a public sphere, but relates to the inaptness of the normative Habermassian public sphere notion at a theoretical level to account for current political and social processes in highly mediatised and popular culture driven societies.

Connolly's (1991) and Mouffe's (1999) work, advocating a radically pluralist democracy is highly pertinent in this regard. They argue, basing themselves on the work of Hannah Arendt, that an agonistic conception of politics, where political differences, tensions and conflicts (of interest) – still present in every society – are made explicit, exposed and mobilised, is to be preferred. Mouffe (1999) distinguishes two kinds of political relations: those between enemies – characterised by antagonism and an intent to destroy or eliminate the 'other' and those between adversaries – characterised by 'agonism'. This latter perspective refers to a struggle of conflicting ideas, but at the same time a common framework of democratic principles. The aim of democracy, according to Mouffe (1999: 755), should be *'to transform an "antagonism" into an "agonism"'*.

This shows an acknowledgement of a conflictual approach to the political and a fundamental critique of the deliberative model that tends to eliminate or eradicate power and conflict in a bid to achieve a rational consensus. Clearly the internet can be seen as providing opportunities for constructing public spaces online, but just as the offline public sphere

is deemed problematic on many accounts, so is an online public sphere. By speaking of an online public sphere, in a sense a normative distinction is introduced between what is being considered good and real democratic discourses – being rational, focussed on the common good etc. versus what is deemed non-political, titter-tatter in the margins, or passionate individual expressions without much value, defined as impact (Dean, 2001: 346–347). From this perspective, the diversity of content out there needs to be recognised for its political potentials and valued accordingly, without restricting or limiting the political in advance. One of the questions raised here, however, is to which extent this form of ‘radical pluralism’ is tenable when taken to its extremes.

Radical pluralism, which fits rather well with the online environment, works best when conceived within an agonistic relationship between adversaries and competing, even conflicting, discourses, but acting in democratic ways (Mouffe, 1999: 775). It becomes more problematic in relation to radically antagonistic agenda’s defining ‘the other’ as an enemy to be destroyed and/or eradicated. Can and should democracies defend themselves against such harmful or as some authors call it ‘wounding’ content (Matsuda, 1993), and if so where to draw the line between what is acceptable and what not?

3. FREEDOM OF SPEECH CONTESTED

The US First Amendment of the Constitution enshrines, among others, the freedom of speech and press. It states that ‘*Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press*’. Some claim that the First Amendment discourse has to be seen as an ideology in itself, a doctrine. This hegemonisation of freedom of speech over other rights resulted in the impossibility to question that freedom. This leads Schauer (1995: 13) to say that there is ‘*little free thought about free thought, little free inquiry about free inquiry and little free speech about free speech*’.

The First Amendment ideology disassociates speech from conduct, from being an act in itself. Speech is protected whatever the content of that speech is and only becomes problematic from a legal perspective when it is acted upon. In doing so, ‘*the action that the speech performs*’ (Butler, 1997: 72) is not taken into consideration. A fairly rigid dichotomy is constructed between the marketplace of ideas and social action. Fish (1994: 107) argues that:

freedom of expression could only be a primary value if what you are valuing is the right to make noise; but if you are engaged in some

purposive activity in the course of which speech happens to be produced, sooner or later you will come to a point when you decide that some forms of speech do not further but endanger that purpose.

Although freedom of speech is undeniably a highly valued cornerstone of US democracy, this right does not take priority over all other rights and liberties at all times. Anti-defamation legislation, laws against obscenity, consumer protection or even copyright law illustrate this clearly. Concerning the relationship between freedom of speech and hate speech the issues are much more complicated. In essence, as Matsuda (1993: 31–32) explains, the First Amendment doctrine can be summarised as: *'people are free to think and say what they want, even the unthinkable. They can advocate the end of democracy'*, and furthermore *'expressions of the ideas of racial inferiority or racial hatred are protected'*.

Opposed to this individualised conception of free speech, detached from action and to the reduction of the commons to a marketplace of ideas, protected by the US First Amendment, is the more European notion of the public sphere, embedded in values such as equality, reason, deliberation, protection, social contract and discourse. In many West-European countries a collective harm-principle prevails over the freedom of speech principle.

The initial harm-principle was introduced by John Stuart Mill, himself a strong advocate of free speech from a liberal perspective. He went even as far as defending the right of what he called *'immoral doctrines'*. Despite this, Mill (1978: 9) formulated a principle under which condition free speech could be limited, clearly challenging the myth of *'unconditional'* free speech¹: *'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others'*. However, given his liberal background, *'doing harm to others'* has to be seen here in an individualistic sense and does not extend to collective harm. Much hate speech would be allowed as it often does not provoke direct harm to an individual. Nevertheless, the harm principle, together with Feinberg's (1985) offence principle, remain important principles on which many advocates of certain limits to free speech base themselves. Another source of inspiration is Popper's *'paradox of tolerance'*. According to Popper an open and tolerant society cannot survive if tolerance is unlimited (1971: 265).

In many European countries, but also countries such as Canada, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand more stringent legislation to counter hate speech and the incitement of racial and ethnic hatred has been enacted. Some countries also voted legislation outlawing holocaust denial or

revisionist discourses. In Germany parties with a fascist ideology can be outlawed.

It has to be stressed though that the effect the global internet and blogs have on these national or regional cultural differences regarding what constitutes freedom of speech is both problematic and empowering at the same time. While the internet allows dissident voices and discourses that are radical to be present and active (unless they are filtered out by internet providers or the state), it similarly enables racist, fundamentalist and anti-public spaces to exist.

4. CASE-STUDY: THE USE OF BLOGS AND FORUMS BY THE NORTH BELGIAN POST-FASCIST MOVEMENT

4.1. Context

The North Belgian post-fascist movement is characterised by a careful balance between on the one hand a strong focus on law and order and a populist anti-immigrant – especially Islamophobic – agenda and on the other a call for the break-up of Belgium and Flemish independence (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). Its main proponent is the party Vlaams Belang, formerly known as Vlaams Blok. In 2004 Vlaams Blok revamped itself to Vlaams Belang after a conviction by the Belgian Supreme Court on the basis of racism and discrimination. The verdict read '*Vlaams Blok is a party that obviously and systematically incites discrimination ... You treat foreigners as criminals, evil doers, abusers of the system, fanatics that refuse to integrate and a threat to the own race.*' (Hof van Beroep, 2004 – my translation).

With more than 20% of the popular vote on a regional level and more than 30% in the biggest North Belgian city of Antwerp, Vlaams Belang has for some time been the second biggest party in the North of Belgium. The historical roots of Vlaams Belang go back to the collaboration of large parts of the Flemish nationalist movement with the German Nazi-regime during WW II (Witte et al., 1997). While less apparent now, this is nevertheless still relevant as this dark past and its current articulations regularly causes embarrassment to the party, which incidentally has never unequivocally broken with that dubious past and those that glorify it in the present. In the most recent legislative elections in June 2007, its share of the vote in Flanders reduced for the first time to 19%. What is missing from this brief and necessarily reductive outline, however, is a

succession of extraordinary and shocking events in the months preceding that election.

First, a local youngster was murdered in broad daylight in the hall of the Brussels Central Station (12/04/2006) after he had refused to hand over his mp3 player. This murder immediately precipitated bold and presumptuous accusations towards Muslim youth, while it later emerged that two Polish young men were responsible for this. A month later (12/05/2006), Belgium was left in shock after a brutal racist murder in the streets of Antwerp. A young man with an extreme right background killed a Caucasian baby and her black minder and wounded a Turkish woman.

These two events, while very distinct in one way, came to be seen in relation to each other, not merely due to the fact that they happened close to one another, but also because of the public debate and outcry, as well as racist discourses they provoked. It is, however, not my intention here to suggest or imply any direct causal link between these events and the disappointing election results for *Vlaams Belang* some months later, which is all together a much more complex issue (see Elchardus and Pelleriaux, 1998; Swyngedouw, 2001).

4.2. Racist discourses in online public spaces

The language being produced by some bloggers or on online forums regarding the above outlined events is quite shocking. The examples below are of course self-selected and thus serve as an illustration of discursive transgressions and nothing more. The argument is easily made that these are marginalised voices and ideas that are present in each society and now find an outlet on the internet. Nevertheless, given the specific North Belgian context where such ideas are at least implicitly supported and promoted by the second biggest political party, this poses a direct threat to democracy itself.

An additional element is that Belgian anti-racism (1981) and anti-discrimination (2003) legislation is fairly stringent. The former forbids discrimination on the grounds of race, skin colour or national or ethnical descent. It also penalises incitement of racial hatred and hate speech. The latter is induced by an EU directive on anti-discrimination and extends this principle beyond race to include discrimination on the basis of (religious) beliefs, age, sexual identity, and handicaps. It also specifically links anti-discrimination with equal treatment in the professional and labour environment. In 1993, the Belgian Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (CGKR) was also established. The Centre

functions as a kind of watchdog opposing all forms of racism and discrimination (see <http://www.diversiteit.be/>). The CGKR also set-up Cyberhate.be, a site where incidences of racism and hate speech online can be reported.

4.2.1. *The murder of Joe Van Holsbeek (12/04/2006)*

Joe Van Holsbeek (17 year) was murdered by Polish kids in broad daylight in the hall of the very busy Brussels Central Station. He was stabbed several times after he refused to hand over his mp3 player. Witness reports, the police, as well as the mainstream media, were quick to suggest that the perpetrators were youngsters of North-African descent and public opinion followed suit, condemning the murder, but by extension also the large Moroccan community in Belgium.

One quite influential right-wing commentator and ideologue, Paul Belien, called upon 'whites' to arm themselves. On a collective blog (www.brusselsjournal.com), Belien (2006 - my translation and emphasis added), an ex-journalist with strong links to Vlaams Belang, asked to 'give us weapons', because he claims:

The predators have knives ... From a very young age **they** have learned to kill warm-blooded animals during the yearly Sacrifice Feast. **We** become sick when seeing blood, but not **them**. **They** are trained, **they** are armed ... The bastards who got everything in our society - free education, childcare benefits, social security - are today killing **our** children for an mp3 player.

This posting shows how at a discursive level a clear distinction is being made between the identity of the self and 'the other', whereby 'we/our' is being constructed as good and morally just while 'they/them' are being projected as evil, dangerous and even sub-human.

After a complaint was filed against him through the CGKR for inciting racial hatred and an interview by the police, Belien removed the above quoted blogpost. It now reads: *'This text was removed on demand of the CGKR ... Although I deny the charges, I will comply to this request'* (Belien, 2006 - my translation).

Another concern being raised by many, including the Belgian Archbishop and the prime minister was the indifference of people witnessing the murder, the fact that nobody intervened during the fight that preceded the fatal stabs and that those responsible were able to flee without anyone stopping them. On the Stormfront forum this led to accusations of cowardice behaviour by 'the own race'.

Besides the cowardly politicians, we should also point to all those white cowards who are present in their ten thousands in Brussels Central Station every day, of whom nobody 'saw anything' or had the guts to intervene (Wehrwolf_VL, post on Stormfront, 17/04/2006 - my translation²).

Two weeks after the murder the police investigation revealed that the perpetrators were not North African, but Polish. The federal police even issued a formal apology towards the North-African community in Belgium.

We regret that the North-African community was immediately accused shortly after the murder, certainly as it now appears that the perpetrators are not from that community (Audenaert, 2006 - my translation).

For some days after this announcement, a discussion was waged on the Stormfront forum doubting the authenticity of these claims. When it appeared that the Polish youngsters were gypsies, the rant on the forum continued.

4.2.2. *The murder of Oulematou Niangadou and Luna Drowart (12/05/2006)*

One month after the murder of Joe Van Holsbeke, a 19-year old Belgian, with an extreme right family background shot down three people in the streets of Antwerp. Hans Van Temsche wounded a Turkish woman and subsequently killed a woman of African descent and the white baby she was minding, after which he was shot himself and arrested by the police. This very act sent shock waves through the Belgian society, not used to street shootings at all. The Prime Minister was quick to link these murders to the extreme right ideology that drives and is being promoted by Vlaams Belang. In a press release Guy Verhofstadt (quoted in De Morgen, 2006) stated: *'These dreadful, cowardly murders are a form of extreme racism. It has to be clear for everybody now to what the extreme right leads'* (my translation). Not unsurprisingly these murders also caused, maybe for the very first time, real panic among the extreme-right movement. The first postings after this event on the Stormfront forum shared this pre-occupation of being associated with these racist murders. Specifically the mainstream media, which is considered to be biased (to the left) by the extreme right, was being targeted for strategically linking these cruel murders to the extreme right ideology.

If this is true, it is very bad. Undoubtedly the leftish press is ready to call Vlaams Belang co-responsible because of its 'stigmatisation' (Stoerman, Posting on Stormfront, 11/05/2006 - my translation³).

The discourses being produced on the Stormfront forum, as in other extreme right forums, were very controversial, wounding, and insulting. I am reluctant to reproduce some of the postings in this chapter, as they are deeply hurting and offensive. However, in order to make the case of transgressing discourses, I deem it necessary to include at least some of them here:

Pfff, it doesn't keep me from sleeping, the only thing I don't understand is why he also shot a white child (Watch Out, Posting on Stormfront, 11/05/2006).

He could have at least taken out a few Jews as well. Antwerp is full of / stinks of Jews (Hidrich, Posting on Stormfront, 13/05/2006).

On moments such as these, I hope that that prime minister of ours is shot by someone with an extreme right ideology (NSDA-Pe, Posting on Stormfront, 12/05/2006).

These discourses of hate and of incitement of violence are not only provocative, but transgress several boundaries way beyond what is acceptable in a democracy, at least within a European and Belgian context. It is thus no surprise that these discourses were reproduced in the mainstream media, both in newspapers and on TV. However, despite the public outcry this provoked, there is/was little or nothing the authorities could do about it. Boonen, from Cyberhate, was quoted as saying:

The internet reality is very complex. Stormfront is a good example of that. ... that site, also the Dutch version, is totally operated from the US. Stormfront Flanders is in other words protected by the freedom of speech as described in the first amendment⁴ (Boonen quoted in *Gazet Van Antwerpen*, 2006).

This exposure in the mainstream media, the subsequent public outcry and the formal complaints to Cyberhate impacted on the debate in the forum. Some became scared and sought re-assurances from others in the forum that their identity would not be revealed.

Do you think [blocking Stormfront] is possible? I hope not. SF is as a second home to me. Would they arrest members of this forum? (Farkasarsang, Posting on Stormfront, 16/05/2006).

Others bashed the media for its left-wing bias and lack of 'objectivity'. One forum participant directly addressed the lurkers that came to visit

the forum after the media reports. And finally, some also resisted and disassociated themselves from such comments. The quote below is an example of the latter:

I'm sorry, but if the negative comments of some put us in a bad perspective, they are responsible for this. If someone on this forum writes 'I had to admit that I slept well thinking about that dead niggerwoman and that crying Turkish woman' then he doesn't have to complain that it appears in the newspaper. How do you want us to be taken seriously if you write something like that? (NoSugar, Posting on Stormfront, 16/05/2006).

It is very apparent that many of the forum participants, as well as bloggers, claim it to be their given right in a democracy to say what they say. At several instances the essentialist and wounding discourses they produce are considered to be 'real' freedom of speech. This is juxtaposed to a fake semi-freedom of speech, one participant even referred to the thought-police (thinkpol) of Orwell.

The fascist identity and ideology of the forum is, among others, exposed by this double standard. On the one hand freedom of speech is invoked to promote hate speech, but on the other hand those voices in the public space that disagree or counter their discourses, such as journalists in the mainstream media and politicians, need to be censored and/or eliminated.

5. CONCLUSION

As has been shown in studies into progressive movements, the internet allows dispersed activists to link-up and interact, superseding boundaries such as space and time, creating subaltern spaces of communication (della Porta and Tarrow, 2004; Cammaerts, 2005). Likewise, for fascist, fundamentalist, and other 'repressive' movements the same applies. Radical, marginalised and atomised groups of people, often politically isolated, are able to link up through the internet in small communities of like-minded, such as could be witnessed in the Stormfront forum. Especially the comments of Farkasfarsang, calling the forum his second home, were pertinent in this regard.

The cases discussed here not only raise seriously questions regarding the notion of citizenship and its relationship to territoriality, but also bring to the fore the issue of anonymity on the internet. As could be observed, the blog-posting was removed as this was written by an

extreme right 'public' (and identifiable) figure. The online forum, however, operates with nicknames and conceals the IP-addresses and identities of its members, who are beyond reach and untouchable.

Given the deeply offensive and repulsive nature of many of the comments being made online and the context in which they were produced, it is difficult to remain neutral here; rational detachment is not an option. Such vitriolic discourses should make any democratic person angry, demanding that action should be taken. However, whilst legal procedures and regulation might be able to remove some of these discourses from the public space, the ideas and ideology behind these discourses do not disappear from the political.

It might be useful in this regard to briefly refer to Butler's (1997) work on *'excitable speech'* in which she uses Foucault's *History of Sexuality* to argue that forbidding hate speech all together (through (state) censorship) above all aids in proliferating these discourses further throughout society. Butler is not per se against limitations to the freedom of speech, but points to the need to be aware of the difficulties of combating hate speech through legal measures and the practical consequences of this. She refers to questions difficult to answer outright, such as: who defines what is hurtful, offensive, wounding or injurious speech and what is the context in which such language is being used?

This is, however, by no means a plea for complacency and ignorance, but to carefully think through the implications of intervention to exclude voices from public spaces of communication and interaction all together. Efforts to combat the incitement of hatred through democratic and legal ways should be encouraged. Such wounding discourses of hate do not belong in a democracy, not even in a radical democracy. As Mouffe (2005: 120) argues, there are limits to pluralism within a democracy: *'A democracy cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries.'* But at the same time it has to be acknowledged that exclusion of voices and demands is always a political decision and should not be based on moral judgements. Mouffe (2005: 121) therefore argues for a conflictual consensus: *a 'consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, dissent about their interpretation'.*

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NOTES

- 1 For more on the myth of press freedom in relation to Mills, see Nordenstreng (2007).
- 2 <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php/belgische-tiener-vermoord-om-mp3-285800p3.html>
- 3 This as well as other quotes in this part can be found on: <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=293314>
- 4 Sofie D'Huster (e-mail interview, 21/05/2007) from CGKR confirms this. She adds that putting pressure on the provider that hosts the site, which tends to work sometimes, is also not productive in this case as Stormfront 'owns their server and the telecommunication connection (the cable) with the internet-world' (my translation).