Chapter 4
The reconstructive approach on the public sphere and the Internet

In his classic treatise on the emerging public sphere in Europe, Jürgen Habermas uncovered new social norms of public communication and reasoning in the new middle class social settings and associations of early 1800s Europe. Jodi Dean (2003) concisely sums them up: disregard for social status, social equality and equal access (anti-hierarchical); new social areas were opened for critical debate (unrestricted agenda); all weight was on the quality of the argument (uncoerced communication); a culture for questioning; and critique about common concerns, open access and inclusivity. Generally, a notion of rationality as reasoning, transparency and inclusivity seems to have permeated the public sites like the British coffee houses, French Salons and German Tischgesellschaften. This form of public communication constitutes a space or a sphere in the sense that the norms were shared by all participants. In principle, they were universal and in principle, could be applied by all. Any vocal rejection of them would only confirm their existence. In practice, the norms excluded most women and the working class, but the self-identity of the public sphere was nevertheless that of rationality, equality and openness.

Among the critics of the English translation of The Structural Transformation was Nancy Fraser (in Calhoun (1993)), who then provided a comment that was more sociological than normative. Are all citizens invited to take part in the public sphere as members of the public, and can they all participate on equal terms? Is it really possible for members of the public sphere to bracket systematic class and status differences and discuss matters of common interest as if they are all equals? If not, is it then probable that the public opinion will come across as legitimate? What Fraser (2007, 81–82) calls the legitimacy critique argued that Habermas’ pioneering study ‘obscured the existence of systemic obstacles that deprive some who are nominally members of the public of the capacity to participate on a par with others, as full partners in public debate.’ Fraser’s point in 1993 was that Habermas focused on the bourgeois public sphere and therefore ignored non-lib-
eral, non-bourgeois, competing publics that without doubt existed and still exist in a conflictual relationship with the construction of consent in the dominant public sphere (Fraser in Calhoun 1993). Fraser’s conclusion was then that the public sphere should have been recognised as being more differentiated.

In pointing out sociological and historical facts about class divides and status hierarchies in civil society, this form of critique questioned the legitimacy of public opinion in democratic theory as well as in social reality. Fraser criticised the liberal public sphere model in *The Structural Transformation* for not taking the social conditions in the real world into consideration. In this chapter, I present and discuss Habermas’ more recent ideas about the contemporary public sphere and related ideas about ‘publics’ and political communication. I also address Habermas’ brief comments on the Internet, and try to extrapolate some thoughts on the digital wave from his more general ideas.

**THE MODERN PRINCIPLE OF PUBLICITY**

From the early nineteenth century on, it was quite clear what the public sphere required to thrive and develop: freedom of the press and expression, social settings, and media for debate and sharing of information. This empirical development had its theoretical parallel in liberal theory. In the traditions from Rousseau, Kant, John Stuart Mill and John Dewey, it is accepted that only a principle of publicity protected by law and connected to an independent and informed public opinion and independent parties can fully exhaust what lies in the concept of popular sovereignty. The importance and emphasis of publicity led to legally protected, open discursive public spaces, from informal political discussion at the pub and in the local newspaper, to formal will formation in political associations. In spite of commercialisation and concentration of newspapers and subsequently broadcasting, the public sphere has manifested itself as a multitude of more or less informal arenas, media, genres and networks, by which ideas and debate circulate throughout society and upwards to more formal bodies of political deliberation and decision (Habermas 1996, 184). Democratic politics today implies more than elections and corporate negotiations: Parliamentary processes rely on ‘the context of discovery provided by a procedurally unregulated public sphere that is borne by the general public of citizens’ (Habermas 1996, 307).

Habermas projects a process of gradual formalisation: The informal will-formation in the public sphere generates ‘influence’, which is transformed into ‘communicative power’ through elections and further into ‘administrative power’ through
legislation. ‘The public opinion that is worked up via democratic procedures into communicative power cannot ‘rule’ of itself, but can only point the use of administrative power in specific directions’ (Habermas in Benhabib 1996, 29). Habermas’s discourse theory relies on the ‘procedures and communicative presuppositions of democratic opinion- and will-formation function as the most important sources for the discursive rationalization of the decisions of an administration constrained by law and statute. Rationalisation means more than mere legitimation but less than the constitution of political power’ (Habermas in Benhabib 1996, 28). This understanding of democracy suggests a new balance of the three resources of money, administrative power and solidarity, from which modern societies, according to Habermas, meet their needs for integration. The normative implications are obvious: ‘The integrative force of “solidarity”, which can no longer be drawn solely from sources of communicative action, should develop through widely expanded and differentiated public spheres as well as through legally institutionalized procedures of democratic deliberation and decision-making. It should gain the strength to hold its own against the two other mechanisms of social (?) integration – money and administrative power’ (Habermas in Benhabib 1996, 28).

The public sphere provides a distinction between the public and the private, as well as between the notion of an ethically unified society, and rational rule. In this sense, it presents a culturally and historically specific solution on the problem of democracy. The distinctions also bring together dimensions from both sides. The private dimension informs the public and keeps what is not suitable for deliberation such as religious convictions. Moral norms on the other hand, are discussed and generated in rational discourse, and unify individuals into a collective. The underlying expectation of a rational discursive treatment of important question for all provides a regulative idea from which actual cases can be evaluated. In this way, the notion of the public sphere distinguishes (and brings together) classical ideas of democracy and the modern mass society saturated by media. The history of modern media therefore is also the history of a dimension of a public sphere of growing importance.

Several disciplines have examined public debates, journalism and other media output in light of such a view. It is assumed that what can be considered as the best solution to moral-political questions can only be generated from the rationality in open deliberation. The public sphere is the place or mechanism where a geographically defined democracy reflects on itself, ‘in which societal conflicts are addressed, legitimacy is generated, and those in power are held to account’ (Salvatore et al. 2013, p. 2). The public sphere translates public opinion into material
for political decisions. The public sphere is seen as comprised by networks of ‘sensors’ that respond to pressure and stimulate opinion-making. It nurtures itself from lifeworld values like socialisation, culture and civil society engagement. The public sphere is seen as a diversity of associations, movements, institutions and organisations in and outside of the civil society, operating on a long list of agendas and with a variety of styles. By contrasting theory and practice, ideals and reality, research has found a platform for critical enquiry. A vital research question concerning the vitality of democracy then is: What are the thresholds and obstacles for relevant insight and open and reasonable debates on public issues? The theoretical and empirical importance of the concept of the public sphere for questions of political legitimacy is therefore evident. In between and in relation to general elections, the public sphere is the locus of legitimising and delegitimising discourses.

The reasons to ensure an inclusive public sphere are many: Giving equal access to cultural resources and opportunities for communication and organisation, providing media resources to marginalised groups, encouraging the media to include dissenting voices, requiring representatives to run regular deliberative exercises in their constituencies, experimentation with deliberative polling, measures against media concentration and many others (See McBride 2005). From the deliberative approach, these measures are regarded as steps towards democratisation. The differentiation of the public sphere complicates its function as a supplier of relevant topics for the decision-making level, but it is more receptive for various needs and interests in society.

The traditional public sphere gradually developed a more inclusive and egalitarian profile. The concept of ‘democratisation’ can be used here in a descriptive sense. As public discourse has become more inclusive and intense because of expansion and fragmentation of a wide range of media and communication networks, the structure of the public sphere has been further transformed.

It is important for Habermas that the public sphere may even appear as a social institution in that it is independent and robustly structured in a way that makes it impossible to manipulate or bribe it with power and money. It is self-reproduced (Habermas 1996, 364). In spite of the majority’s seemingly passive role, actors on the stages of the public sphere must appear credible to the lay public, and cannot simply ignore private experiences and demands of the citizenry.

In contrast to the conventional liberal model, debate and deliberation in the circulation of public opinions are regarded as vital in that they ‘[exert] a rationalising pressure towards improving the quality of the decision’ (Habermas 2009, 143). The model is more concerned with quality than with aggregates. ‘The deliberative
model conceives of the public sphere as a sounding board for registering problems which affect society as a whole, and at the same time as a *discursive filterbed* which sifts interest-generalising and informative contributions to relevant topics out of the unregulated processes of opinion-formation, broadcasts these “public opinions” back onto the dispersed public of citizens, and puts them on the formal agendas of the responsible bodies’ (Habermas 2009, 143). The discursive (communicative) rationalisation that takes place in the public sphere implies that politics is legitimised but also improved through the cooperative discourses. The rationalising power of the public sphere as ‘influence,’ encompasses formation of more or less justified opinions, not to the decisions themselves.

The opinion formation in democratic societies is seen by Habermas as independent from, but connected to, formal decision-making bodies and ‘is effected in an open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal social and substantive boundaries’ (Habermas 1996, 307). It is mediated by the mass media and flows through different publics and forms what Habermas calls an anarchic structure and a ‘wild’ complex that resists organisation. (Therefore, we may add, it is very difficult to examine empirically.) To be sure, public discourse is vulnerable to political pressure from above and easily affected by distorted communication in the media. But more importantly, from a discursive point of view, it possesses a ‘medium’ of unrestricted communication where new problems can be formulated and collective understandings of the world can be constructed (Habermas 1996, 310). Public discourses possess little or no formal power, but they can articulate interpretations and general interests with limitations and compulsions, especially on the Internet. What the American sociologist Talcott Parsons called *influence* becomes an object of controversy among interest groups and NGOs and leading figures in academic life and arts and popular culture, but must resonate in a wider public (Habermas 1996, 364). Political influence is supported by public opinion and converted into political power when it affects the decisions of authorised members of the political system. In itself, the public sphere is relieved from the burden of decision-making (Habermas 1996, 362).

**PUBLIC COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE**

How are we to describe this abstract space? Habermas calls the current political public sphere a ‘sounding board’ for problems that must be solved by the political system, and a ‘warning system’ with sensors that are unspecialised but still sensi-
tive throughout society (Habermas 1996, 359). It not only identifies problems but also addresses possible solutions, even dramatises them journalistically in such a way that they are picked up by formal politics. This is typically the task of ad hoc groups in civil society (the social basis of the public sphere) and journalism in concert. The political public sphere is also described as a network for communicating information and points of view: ‘the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions’ (Habermas 1996, 360). Concretely, we speak of fora, stages, arenas, performances and presentations that make up transitory publics, normally based on face-to-face encounters, but generalised and intellectualised to reach larger audiences (Habermas 1996, 361). The public sphere is a ‘communication structure’ that refers neither to the function nor to the contents of everyday communication but to the social space generated in communicative action (Habermas 1996, 360).

The democratic authority of the public sphere is anchored in the notion of deliberative politics, politics as reasoning about the most fair and just solutions. Habermas argues that ‘the formation of political will is channeled through the filter of discursive opinion formation’ (Habermas 2009, 146). This reconstruction presents, according to Habermas an independent, normative standard of how things should work, but it is not taken out of thin air. The theory of communicative action and rationality, he argues, reflects what is actually happening in everyday language. Whether political communication follows the norm of rational discourse can only be tested in empirical research (Habermas 2009, 149).

What Habermas calls ‘epistemic proceduralism’ constitutes a third and more sophisticated methodological view of conditions for democratic process than that offered by methodological individualism (rational choice), and the hermeneutics of ‘republican’ and communitarian perspectives. Habermas argues that there is a cognitive potential in discursive processes that neither rational choice nor hermeneutics can account for. The ‘epistemic’ implies that processes of rationalisation in public discourse may generate new and improved knowledge. The cognitive or epistemic dimension satisfies conditions of a functional division of labour between arenas or publics that enables society to enhance discursive processes of opinion and will formation. This counts as more than utopianism, Habermas argues, since (according to the theory of communicative action) normative validity claims inherent in actual argumentation may enable mutual understanding and cooperation (Habermas 2009, 146). Such validity claims assume that what is said is true or right or truthful and can be justified. Contrary to centrifugal systemic powers, they tend to encourage convergence of views.
The public sphere in contemporary advanced societies is heterogeneous and complex. It consists of episodic publics in pubs and cafés, of occasional arranged publics like presentations and theatre performances or church meetings and of abstract publics of readers, and audiences of the mass media. Still, we may talk about one public sphere:

‘Despite these manifold differentiations, however, all the partial publics constituted by ordinary language remain porous to one another. The one text of “the” public sphere, a text continually extrapolated and extending radically in all directions, is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context: yet one can always build hermeneutical bridges from one text to the next. Segmented public spheres are constituted with the help of exclusion mechanisms; however, because publics cannot harden into organizations or systems, there is no exclusion rule without a proviso for its abolition’ (Habermas 1996, 374). Since the public sphere understands itself historically as open and egalitarian, the boundaries are permeable.

For instance, experiences such as those of an African immigrant in Europe may be difficult to bring forward due to cultural and linguistic difficulties. Such experiences may be easier to make public through artistic means, such as a photo exhibition, a collection of poems or rap music. Such cultural and strictly speaking non-discursive expressions may still contribute to a discourse on multicultural society – and may be brought further by others into a more formal debate on legislative changes. Thus one may think of the public sphere spanning from a periphery (for instance the street manifestation) towards a centre (the Parliament debate).

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In nation states, according to Habermas, political communication circulates in and between three levels: (1) institutionalised discourse and deliberation in the centre of the political system, as in parties, parliaments, courts, committees etc.; here political programs, judicial findings, official guidelines, policies and regulations are decided; (2) media-based networks of communication in front of a national audience where public opinion takes shape. The political relevance lies in that opinions are widely published and the central actors (following Peters), in addition to the media professionals, are lobbyists, general interest groups and NGO advocates, experts, moral entrepreneurs who draw attention to neglected problems, and intellectuals who are involved on behalf of general interests. They are
all involved in the production of public opinions, that is: they produce clusters of controversial issues and inputs to which concerned parties attach different weights. They exert influence, and form a milieu to which thoughts and feelings adjust (Habermas 2009, 146, 159). (3) The third level is every day, face-to-face communication in civil society in arranged or informal publics, where voters are influenced over time (Habermas 2009, 159).

The public sphere has its centre at the middle level. (Habermas 2009, 164). It is rooted in civil society and forms itself at the periphery of the state. It contributes to political legitimation ‘by producing political communication, by keeping it alive, by steering – and filtering – it. Thus I understand the public sphere as an intermediate system of mass communication, situated between the formally organized deliberations and negotiations at the centre and the arranged or informal conversations which take place in civil society at the periphery of the political system’ (Habermas 2009, 159). The political public sphere is according to Habermas the periphery of the political system; it is a part of it. In that case, the political system legitimises itself. This is a position one expects to find in the ancient demos and in realist approaches, but hardly in Habermas: ‘the centre and the periphery of the political system differ in their respective levels of density of institutions. Whereas the legally binding force of “political power” is attached to offices, the “political influence” of public opinions grows out of a network of criss-crossing flows of communication’ (Habermas 2009, 164).

Voluntary organisations in civil society anchor the communication in the public sphere to lifeworld values of culture and solidarity. They form the organisational substratum of the general public of citizens. (Habermas 1996, 367). They are perhaps not the most conspicuous element of the public sphere, compared to multinational media corporations, opinion research, public relations and political parties. Nevertheless, they represent citizens’ interests and seek influence on the public agenda, and they do so backed by rights. Under certain circumstances, civil society can acquire influence in the public sphere with decisive effect on parliamentary processes, in spite of the ‘power-ridden mass media-dominated public spheres of Western democracies’ (Habermas 1996, 373). The voices of civil society are likely to be heard when the political system itself experiences indecision or weakness as in times of crisis or when the government has gone too far in its uses of power. However, according to Habermas, ‘the image of a commercial media-dominated public sphere pertains only to a public sphere at rest. In periods of mobilisation, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate. The balance of power between civil society and the political system then shifts’ (Habermas 1996, 379).
For Habermas, public discourse, deriving from civil society anchored in life-world experiences, is of a higher discursive quality than communication instigated from commercial media, parties, public-relation agencies and public opinion bureaus. They are indispensable in that no other source can bring up essential problems facing society. None of the critical topics, like the nuclear arms race, environmental and climate problems, or ethical dilemmas in the wake of genome research, were put forward by political parties, private companies or media organisations. We see how Habermas’ critical perspective remains in his view of the public sphere, as a sphere of both communicative rationality, and polemics of power elites before the public. Whereas the first emerges from civil society, the latter are loaded with power and material resources.

Another intermediate group is the reporters and editors, the Publizisten who exercise heavy editorial power over all the big mass media, including control over the public agendas and how topics are to be framed. In addition, they have taken the role of the intellectual: How we miss the grand performances, Habermas writes, of the great intellectuals like Gunter Grass, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu! Self-ironically, but not without sincerity, Habermas observes that the experts and the professional commentators have taken over from the intellectuals. The press and other mass media dominate the public sphere and need the famous personality of another kind than the post-war intellectual. Now the boundaries between self-promotion and discourse are blurring, and the old intellectual does not feel as welcome. The new TV-personalities and the experts simply do a better job (Habermas, 2009, 54).

Citizens are simultaneously members of society and bearers of a public sphere. In the first capacity, they act through a variety of different roles (clients, tourists, patients, students). The experiences from this part of life are then brought into the public sphere and converted into collective experiences through communication among strangers over great distances, which *ipso facto* makes it public. What defines the distinction between the private and the public sphere is not the issues or the media themselves but this condition of communication that safeguards the intimacy and the publicity respectively in the two spheres (Habermas 1996, 366). People experience problems in their lifeworld (with unemployment, hospital treatment, etc.), which find expression in the public sphere through individual engagement but more often via the mobilisation of civil society. Competition between political parties yields the hope that politics absorbs the addressed problems, reformulates them as political issues and places them on the political agenda.

Habermas argues that the reality concerning political communication in our society is not at odds with the normative requirements of deliberative politics.
Elites in the public sphere, for example, unavoidably serve two functions: As they attempt to secure their power base, to influence politics with their actions and views, or simply to make a profit, they collectively contribute to the reproduction and the critical vitality of the public sphere. In this sense, the public sphere is a side-effect of individual and organisational attempts to define problems and propose solutions for the political system (Habermas 1996, 370). The interventions of powerful actors do not subvert the idea of a public sphere as long as (1) the media system maintains its independence, and is able to connect both the political centre and civil society in the public sphere, and (2) The civil society empowers citizens to engage in public discourse (Habermas 2009, 173). Then democratic legitimation takes place through inputs that express the variety of the population. By staying away from formal politics, it can comment freely and unconditionally on the actual issues. Habermas argues, ‘Only across the full scope of the process of legitimation can “deliberation” perform the filtering function which justifies the supposition that the process of political will formation fishes the reasonable elements of opinion formation out of the murky streams of political communication’ (Habermas 2009, 160).

The role of the public sphere in legitimation processes is to identify issues and mobilise alternative and perhaps controversial answers (Habermas 2009, 162). No deliberation is expected to take place here, but still the demands for a political public sphere are considerable. The leading figures are expected to pick up impulses from civil society, address, discuss and reformulate them before they are ‘sluiced’ both to the public and to the political system (Habermas 2009, 162).

Such reflexive public opinions are formulated as normatively conditional, which may be used as standards for identifying actual problems of communication. It is Habermas’ ambition to provide a normative model that is nevertheless empirically applicable (Habermas 2009, 163). This is the reconstructive point: an ideal that, Habermas argues, has its foundation in actual communication.

IMPLICATIONS OF MODERN MEDIA

Habermas’ main question in his keynote address to the media researchers at the International Communication Association conference in Dresden on June 20, 2006 was whether deliberation in the public sphere actually introduces an epistemic dimension to political decision-making, i.e. whether the public sphere can bring new insights and solutions to politics today. Habermas has previously given arguments for the potential of the public sphere, but what can be said about the
current condition in western democracies? The volume of political communication in the public sphere has expanded dramatically, but it is at the same time dominated by non-deliberative communication. Habermas argues that there is a lack of egalitarian face-to-face interaction and reciprocity between speakers and addressees in a shared practice of collective decision-making (Habermas 2006, 414). More importantly, the very dynamics of mass communication, Habermas claims, are driven by the power of the self-regulated system of the mass media to select and dramatise, simplify and polarise information. He presents something of a media-centric argument, suggesting that the increasing influence of radio and TV fosters increasing ignorance, apathy and low-level trust in politics: ‘The data I have mentioned suggest that the very mode of mediated communication contributes independently to a diffuse alienation of citizens from politics’ (Habermas 2006, 424). However, the strategic use of political power to influence and trigger agendas and issues is according to Habermas also an increasing problem. In other words, in the public sphere of communicative action, strategic action has continued to intervene.

For Habermas, ‘the networks of media and of news agencies form the infrastructure of the public sphere.’ (Habermas 2009, 164). With the mass media, the public sphere became dramatically widened, and with the Internet, it became ever more interaction-oriented, inclusive and complex. Habermas is painfully aware that the sociocultural challenges for a contemporary public sphere are immense. The cost of democratisation, Habermas argues, is a ‘decentring of unedited inputs, where the intellectual can no longer constitute a focal point’ (Habermas 2009). Diversity of interests, worldviews and cultural life forms increases the burden on convergence ability in the public sphere. How can all these different voices melt into a reasonable discourse that can inform, legitimise, and even rationalise politics? No doubt, democratic politics is attentive to public opinion. In fact, politics seems to have become media politics: “The inflated volume of messages, ideas and images in circulation creates at least an impression that contemporary politics is becoming ever more deeply entangled in processes of mass communication, indeed that it is being assimilated into and transformed by them’ (Habermas 2009, 153). It is Habermas' impression that we are witnessing a communicative ‘liquefaction’ of politics, which seems to be a consequence of the turn towards an information economy (Bell), information flows and information technology networks (Castells). Political communication circulates widely in society, often as a strategic ‘medium’.

However, according to Habermas, this tendency cannot cancel the principles of deliberation. The post war mass media society offered several functional features
to a stable political public sphere. Mass media tend to be relatively sensitive to lay people’s expressions and opinions but remain relevant for great publics and cannot — contrary to discussion and chat on Facebook or blogs — be too disturbed by the immediacy of trivial particularities. The popular sovereignty was heard through the voices of the intellectuals and the elite, which provided stability and quality. However, invitation to true dialogue with audiences was cumbersome, and opinion was relatively disconnected from learning and reasoning. The asymmetrical nature of the mass media tended to turn people into consumers and spectators. Mass communication divides the public sphere into a minority of experts and journalists who keep the conversation going, and a silently observing majority. Many in the supply-side group of information producers rarely enter into deliberation processes themselves, as that would conflict with their roles as neutral experts and professionals (Habermas 2009, 157).

Habermas distinguishes between three forms of power in the public sphere: (1) political power in constant need of at least passive legitimation in the form of reasonable agreement with the decision-making process; (2) power such as economic power deriving from positions in functional systems; and (3) media power of media professionals based on technology and mass media infrastructure, who define the public agenda and filter and stylise messages (Habermas 2009, 167–70). All three forms of power, Habermas argues, must, however, obey the communicative logic of the public sphere. In spite of uneven distribution of resources, and whatever their intentions, they must all respect the rule of the discursive game: The generally most reasonable and therefore most convincing arguments end up getting the upper hand. All agents must contribute facts and arguments that they consider convincing and which in turn are exposed to critical examination (Habermas 2009, 171).

One could get the impression that Habermas considers the mediated dimension of the public sphere as mainly composed by the press, increasingly challenged by radio and TV. But this impression would certainly underestimate Habermas as an observer of contemporary Europe. I believe that his passing and relatively dismissive judgement on the Internet derives from his prime interest in the public sphere seen from the point of view of political democracy, not from the point of view of the media. Habermas is primarily concerned with the deliberative legitimation of politics in differentiated and complex societies, which requires some kind of public focussing and ordering of issues and solutions. In Habermas’ examination, this leads to a focus on (1) national rather than on local and regional or global public spaces; (2) on the political public sphere at the expense of the literary/cultural public sphere; and (3) most importantly here, on the dimensions of the
political public sphere that directly influence legitimate, political decision-making by providing thematic focus and consolidation.

On the basis of Habermas’ thoughts, we may conclude that, first, what Habermas calls ‘issue publics’ overlap with publics with interest in social and political change, which is pursued through other media. Membership in various publics, either with respect to themes or media (magazine readers, human movements activists, bloggers, TV-viewers, etc.) is not mutually exclusive. Second, the diversity of Internet communication (measured as the scope of issues and viewpoints, degrees of civility) is larger than in the mass media, thus representing the worst and the best from the point of view of rational discourse. To control the explosive growth of information on the Net, socio-technological tools are developed to search, filter and target the available information (such as tags, filters, blog-lists, RSS-feeds, search engines, meta-sites, tracking systems, etc.). Third, with the Internet, the collective, mainstream nature of the hitherto mass-mediated public sphere has become more in tune with individualisation in modern society. With interaction rather than reception, subjective preferences and viewpoints are more easily articulated and linked to others, reproducing webs of intersubjectivity. The autonomy and self-realisation typically associated with the modern individual ‘fits’ better with the public sphere partly reproduced through what I call personal media (Rasmussen 2014). Personal media technologies like the mobile and the laptop with their wide variety of media, represent the modern individual’s communication tool in that they allow not only for social interaction with friends and relatives, but also for critical judgement vis-à-vis others in weak-tie associations that are linked together with new and old media.

To Habermas, these facts do not refute the validity of the deliberative model of democracy, because the public sphere has precisely the function of ‘cleansing’ or ‘filtering’ flows of political communication. From the processing and compartmentalising of the wild and diverse communication (entertainment, shows, news reports, commentaries, etc.) in the public sphere, politics struggle to select relevant information (problems, arguments, solutions). As an infrastructure for the public sphere, the media sector possesses certain rules, by which the players must play, in order to be taken seriously and to be efficient. Through deliberation, the public sphere is able to raise issues, provide arguments, specify interpretations and propose solutions. In the public sphere, demands from social movements and interest groups in civil society become translated into political issues and arguments and articulate manifest, reflexive public opinions. The model of deliberative communication, Habermas argues, provides a critical standard by which disturbances and constraints in the public sphere can be criticised. For reasons of
legitimacy, the political system must keep itself open to the political influence of society. The public sphere thus links to established politics and to the civil society, which must empower people to participate in informed, public discourses.

INTERNET SCEPTICISM

In 2006, Habermas considered the Internet to be of little significance to the public sphere. Addressing the Internet only in passing, he pointed out that interaction on the Internet only has democratic significance in so far as it undermines censorship of authoritarian regimes. In democratic countries, however, the Internet serves only to fragment audiences ‘into a huge number of isolated issue publics’. Habermas claimed that: ‘Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication when news groups crystallise around the focal points of the quality press, for example national newspapers and political magazines’ (Habermas 2005, 422). To Habermas, the mass media constituted the main base of a modern public sphere because the quality press attracted interest for reasons of quality. In digital media, he could see no functional equivalents for the structures of publicity, which could reassemble and synthesise them in edited form: ‘Political communication within national publics seems at present to be able to benefit from online debates only when groups that are active on the web refer to real processes, such as election campaigns or current controversies, for example, in an attempt to mobilise the interest and support of members’ (Habermas 2009, 158). In a deliberative perspective, activity on the Net surrounding parties or newspapers seemed to be of limited value, and he preferred to rely on the more structured dynamics of mass communication.

Habermas has not been alone with this somewhat sceptical view. Benjamin Barber addressed the Internet in relation to his notion of a ‘strong democracy’, by which he means a democratic alternative where the citizens are engaged at the local and national levels in a variety of political activities, and where discourse and debate are essential conditions for reaching common ground in a multicultural society (Barber in Jenkins and Thorburn 2004, 37). In such a normative understanding, Barber argues, the Internet and new media technologies do not play a favourable role, due to a series of key attributes of the new media. Their speed, reductive simplicity and tendency to polarisation, the solitariness of their user interface, their bias towards images over text, their resistance to hierarchical mediations and their inclination towards segmentation rather to a single integrated community – all these tendencies – pull communication away from the possibility
of deliberation and informed choices. Furthermore, they tend to distribute illegitimate or confused information, in contrast to the authoritative interpretations in the mass media that form our norms and standards. Barber argued that digitalisation tends to compartmentalise information and to create knowledge niches for niche markets. This obstructs the common framework necessary for representative democracy and indispensable for a strong democracy (Barber 2003, 44).

A mature democracy, Barber argued, depends on knowledge rather than information and thus on mediators that test, verify and contextualise information in ways that make information meaningful. The Internet is not up to such a task, partly because it puts individual immediate needs before the considerations of the public sphere. Nicholas Negroponte (1995) was among the first to address the personalised character of news on the Net, what he called the ‘Daily Me’. Later, this personalisation has been reinterpreted as an unfortunate individualisation, which leads to a decline in civil engagement and a negative spiral of fragmentation of the common public sphere (Putnam 2001). Cass Sunstein (2009) warned that the Internet could have detrimental effects for the development of public opinion insofar as it may generate segmentation, parallel spheres or group polarisation. In such a structure, like-minded people will seek each other and cultivate their common view distant from others.

In a similar vein, Michael Schudson (in Jenkins and Thorburn 2004, 49) has argued that if digital media are to be integrated with democracy and into a serious understanding of citizenship, we need to expand our notion of citizenship from that of the informed citizen. Being informed is not the basis of a democracy, Schudson argues, and illustrates this with the rich conceptions of citizenship in American history. Schudson expressed doubt that the digital media will be able to support and serve to expand the current narrow notion of citizenship that in no way is prepared for a robust public sphere. Later, Schudson (2006) has argued more favourably that the Internet may assist political groups in doing more of what they are already organised to do. Internet use is a matter of amplifying existing forces. Generally, Schudson argues, it is difficult to speak of ‘impacts’ of technology on democracy, because both concepts entail so many things. Schudson (2006) notes that among the great transformations related to journalism and politics, only a few of them relate to new technologies. That social movements and trade unions turn to the Internet, he argues, is no evidence for the democratic potential of the Internet in any decisive way. Schudson is among those that argue that great political changes would have happened anyway, with or without the Internet.
CONCLUSION

From the sociological observation of modernity (pluralism, secularisation), Habermas’ theory is constructed to account for why pluralism is a challenge to the existing political structure. But then these reasons are formulated normatively. Explanations are turned into prescriptions: political action is seen to be rationalised through reflection as a basis for the reconstruction of a model of a rational society. Descriptions are, as Newey (2001, 132) points out, taken to be the basis for an essentially normative account of how ideally rational political agents would act. However, not all people are reasonable in the sense that they can follow a norm of non-contradiction (Geuss 2010, 54). First, people can hold contradictory views simultaneously and do not seem to suffer from that. Second, reason is only, if at all, one kind of authority in life. We see every day how people seek different kinds of cultural, religious, mystical, medical, etc. authorities. We cannot assume that reason holds a privileged position. Rather, political sociology ought to be sensitive to how principle, prudence and self-interest, means and ends, reason and emotion, are bound together in politics in potentially unpredictable ways, always partly dependent on circumstance and context. Third, sociology and political science emphasise the arbitrary, non-moral and non-reasonable aspects of politics because they think they flourish in politics, and because the Kantians are not willing to recognise this fully in their theories.

Contra Habermas, others have therefore argued that the notion of the public sphere must be considerably expanded if it is to include important changes in both Europe and less stable nation states. Nancy Fraser argues, as we have seen, that in a stratified society, the public sphere is and must be characterised by counter-publics: conflict-ridden, identity-based and often emotional (Fraser 1993). Fraser and others see struggle and contestation as intrinsic features of a public sphere in a pluralist and class-divided society, or simply as important public impulses to democracy (Papacharissi 2004).

In Germany for example, websites and debating sites popped up against government policy in 2015 when the migrant crisis escalated. Demonstrations against the refugee policy took place in all states, criminal acts on refugee asylum hostels and even arson attacks increased dramatically. While right-wing extremists used mainstream nationalist parties (such as the German AfD) to generate support, ordinary people were concerned with ordinary things. Many lost their polit-

ical orientation in a depoliticised landscape and turned to the new and strong populist voices. This is ‘affective politics’ from the right, but it nevertheless indicates what Habermas once called colonisation of the lifeworld.

Deliberation is a too heavy a burden for the public sphere to carry. Withholding a too tight connection between a rational public sphere and a deliberative notion of democracy could imply exclusion of important types of non-discursive, collective forms of action, and in fact function ideologically. Milioni (2009), for instance, has studied the activist and alternative globalisation network Indymedia (NIMC) in Greece and found that the Internet, as the backbone of all activities, was used in innumerable innovative ways. She concludes that the concept of a public sphere is a useful concept to understand the online space, given that it acknowledges the diversity of publics, the new roles and repertoires of online activists and the need for an open model for political communication. Dahlgren reaches similar conclusions (Dahlgren 2005, 2013; see also Anduiza et al. 2012). Jodi Dean went further in suspecting that the arguments for the Internet as a public sphere work as ideologies that legitimise not only the Net but global capital, of what she calls communicative capitalism. The ideas about the Net as an inclusive and democratic site for debate and interaction are pursued, she argues, to establish the trust necessary for consumer confidence in online transactions, and ‘to make appear as a public sphere what is clearly the material basis of the global economy.’ (Dean, 2003, 100). When the Internet is said to have solved the democratic worry about whether face-to-face deliberation can work in large-scale societies, it really legitimises communicative capitalism. This is a point to which we will return.

The model of politics in Habermas is a peculiar theoretical hybrid of empirical description and idealised construction. Habermas’s version of political theory is normatively reconstructive in that it seeks to clarify the necessary and sufficient conditions for an optimal or ideal democracy. It is reconstructive in that it seeks to bring out latent structures inherent in language, culture and society that may be seen as a standard by which democracy can measure itself. Rawls call his approach utopian realism (as does Giddens, meaning that there is change inherent in all forms of order). It describes a formal political structure that exists, and then adds a utopian element; that all political agents operate morally, consistently and rationally. Ordinary people are seen – constructed – as free and equal citizens with a capacity for moral conceptions of justice and the good, operating in reasonable and comprehensive doctrines. An existing political structure is placed within a rational context of a just and good society with the help of the formulas of overlapping consensus or discursive ethics. An ideal–typical model of politics is then adapted to an ideal model of what the Kantians tend to think is politics.
There are other problems with idealisation in political theory: First, it backs away from real conditions involving action, conflict and power; second, it assumes a moral continuation, not rupture, from society to politics; and thus doesn’t sufficiently recognise politics as an autonomous domain. Third, its idealisation of theory shifts to making counterfactual (but strictly speaking false or impossible) claims about society – what society ought to or can achieve in terms of democracy. The problem here is that it may play an ideological role by diverting attention away from power and conflict; and, provide an image of politics and society that it cannot ever fulfil. Why should sociology operate with such illusions?