Chapter 8
Towards Internet Realism

‘Where is the new Michel Foucault who tries to explain how modern power is exercised?’

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To draw on the Internet as a normative model for society, and furthermore to adapt society to the Internet, would imply precisely the contrary of what the Internet utopians and liberals want: a society under the control of market forces that produce and profit from extraordinarily smart ways of invading our privacy. To understand this implies realism. Social research including media research needs to examine how various economic and political powers rhetorically and factually make use of the Internet and seek to direct its development. Evgeny Morozov positions Internet realism in opposition to Internet centrism: ‘Thus while Internet-centrists assume that Google is “open” by default, their opponents – let’s call them Internet realists – assume that Google does a lot of work to look “open” and investigate what that work involves. While Internet-centrists tend to be populist and unempirical, Internet realists start with no assumptions about the intrinsic values of “openness” and “transparency” – let alone their inherent presence in digital networks – and pay particular attention to how these notions are involved and manifested in particular debates and technologies. While Internet-centrists believe that “openness” is good in itself, Internet realists investigate what the rhetoric of “openness” does for governments and companies – and what they do for it’ (Morozov 2013, 93). The Internet, as a complex ensemble of genres, media and technologies, contexts and users, clearly serves no political model more than any other infrastructure. Rather, like any fair competition ground it tends to serve the strongest players.

In order to understand the political (and democratic) role of the Internet, it is necessary to begin with an empirically sensitive and normatively neutral model of public opinion. Such a model cannot be presented in full here, and I must confine

myself to sketching out some of the ways such a realistic theory of public opinion might go. I draw on some of the insights of political realism and the political sociology of Niklas Luhmann (1990, 2002). While political realism poses a powerful critique against idealism, systems theory is among the few positions that present an alternative to action-theoretical thinking of conventional ideas about public opinion.

In order to understand the role of the Internet, it is necessary to abstract from the perspective of agency to its historical and functional operation in a modern (differentiated) and therefore complex society. In such a society, public opinion appears as a reflection and mirror for communication among sectors, organisations and individuals of society. In questions of what to do about society and who is to do it, i.e., in the question of political power, politics is the main address for public communication. Public opinion provides facts and opinion, problems and solutions, as a reservoir for politics. Contrary to what the theories of a deliberative democracy argue, reason and quality have no special place here. The motive of influence in the name of reason is one among many, and motive must not be confused with effect. Public opinion presents condensed political communication of all sorts. The filtering mechanisms in the institutions and media of public opinion operate according to the logics of the media, the technologies, the private sphere, the economy and so on.

I have already hinted that the background for the current self-understanding of the public sphere is historical. In the nineteenth century, parliaments observed its environments as argument (see Guibentif 2010). Movements and sentiments were increasingly mediated by the emerging press, and could be attributed to as support for distinct positions. Policies could be presented with arguments that it would reduce discontent and riots. (Bismarck) The general recognition of this mechanism enhances mobilisation in an emerging modern public opinion. The new complex interaction game of legitimacy and legitimation emerged between the state and civility in ever more sophisticated and differentiated ways. Initially, the emerging mediated public opinion (press) found itself in an intermediate position, (structural coupling), but subsequently developed values of its own. The backbone of public opinion, the mass media, differentiated out a form of communication that complicated the production of legitimacy for the state and political forces in public opinion in the twentieth century. Legitimacy needed to be produced materially through a welfare state of universal services that subsequently could be critically evaluated and compared. Today, public opinion is a mechanism or filter, which has placed itself at the ‘centre’ of society. With the increasing differentiation and complexity of society, leaving politics in no prioritised position, public opinion gets a
tougher job in condensing, fixing, compressing, and selecting issues for political consideration. In the 1990s, with the advent of the Web, the Internet presented itself as a problem and a solution: It opened for a democratisation of public opinion, which subsequently expanded its periphery considerably into the new century. It simultaneously presented a series of new ways to handle this dramatic information flow.

Public opinion has passed a transition towards expansion, complexity, increasing sensitivity to local and informal questions and problems that used to go under the radar, as well as large-scale leaks of information, etc. In terms of political power, the Internet introduced increasing participation (often confused with democratisation in a normative sense) and increasing control in the name of stability and profit. It has admitted large portions of the formerly relatively passive public into the public opinion, and paved the way for pervasive surveillance and algorithmic monitoring.

The main question of ‘rationality’ in the wake of the Internet is political: How can politics handle the complexity of society when even the issue-organising function of the political public opinion becomes so loaded with diversity? Would public opinion still be able to generalise problems and make them into topics for debate? What happens with political legitimacy understood as a general acceptance of the political order and political decisions – if contingency becomes more apparent, if political ‘reason’ as such is doubted? As we constantly observe in Europe and elsewhere, the alternative to legitimacy and trust is not only coherent protest, but also apathy and wild riots. To find excuses for action, power does not have to look far.

In a generalised view, public opinion is reflection about society. However, reflection produces no solutions or ways out of fundamental problems, only what Charles Cooley called a looking-glass self for politics and other social systems. To see oneself similarly to the way others see one, through the mirror of public opinion, may induce a change of behaviour. But politics is no longer in the position to command fundamental change, and Internet-influenced public opinion is increasingly difficult to decode. Precisely for this reason, it may be easier to select preferential, that is favourable, information as legitimation. The mirror-effect of the Internet is steamed by the multi-dimensionality of media, genres, styles and participants.

Sociology as well as Internet research and media research need to approach this situation soberly and analytically by trying to make sense of the circulation of issues as structure, constantly emerging and dissolving. Often solid empirical work stands in a peculiar contrast to the omnipresent normative theory of the pub-
lic sphere that presents reason and consensus as ‘reconstructive’ ideals. The usual strategy is to point out the discrepancy between the model of a rational public sphere and the imperfect reality. To compare a reality characterised by power struggle and conflict with the utterly unachievable, is however no viable strategy for empirical social sciences. Society can never reach such ideals, nor is it approaching such ideals. Theory should rather address real phenomena, like the careers of public topics in the age of the Internet, in a generalised non-normative sense. The question ought to be: What roles do the operations of Internet-based media play in reproducing social and political stability?

Due to its low threshold for use (and the breakdown in many Internet-based media of the distinction between sender and receiver), the Internet enables new topics and opinions, and new forms and styles of expression. Its closeness to the private sphere encourages communication about personal experiences, feelings and opinions that are less disciplined and conforming. Previously private political communication now become public, and those who express themselves always seem to find a listener. And if there is a listener somewhere, there is always a topic to be constructed or addressed. Also the unpolitical (aesthetic, scientific, emotional) ways of handling political topics increase, as does the non-political contextualisation. Different rules for constructing topics in order to attract attention apply. Many of the same rules for generating attention and popularity in the mass media (actuality, closeness, moral indignation, person-orientation, scandal, etc.) prevail. The majority of topics may have short life spans unless they are picked up by professional media. They may converge and diverge, transmute in various ways, probably in a hastier way than was the case in the age of the press and broadcasting. Time passes more quickly on the Internet. We may ask: in the age of digital evanescence, what seems to last?

The power of public opinion to integrate on a national level evaporates, as its moral authority differentiates. Too many things go on at the same time, enhancing segmentation and ‘balkanisation.’ The nature of ‘parallel lives’, a multitude of scenes and events for specialised publics, of ignorance and knowledge side by side, increases with the growing number of topics in a wide variety of media and genres. The status of the sender decreases. The integration effect takes place more in the nature of interconnected clusters than as local and national audiences. When the national mass media seriously lose their audiences and become reduced to niche media, the predominance of network integration introduces intensified challenges for political society involving legitimacy.

Although the Internet is truly one of the most astonishing wonders of this world, its political uses can no longer be described as progress. It implies an intensified
renewing of society and for every good effect, there seem to be a negative one. All effects have side effects, and so it goes. The nature of change, increasing complexity that is in part controlled by the very complexity-inducing mechanisms, is in a sense beyond good and bad. Its immense variability implies a more demanding environment for politics and other social systems, to encode and decode in strategic successful ways. The question remains whether public opinion is able to present a politically meaningful environment for politics.

With the pluralisation and individualisation of society, differentiation has become a problem in the public sphere. The active use of personal media is one factor leading to difference and what Pellizoni (2003) calls (with Kuhn) incommensurability. This difference is a major challenge for theories of deliberation. According to Rawls and Habermas, rational deliberation must find some common ground, based on moral arguments of justice, leading to consensus or binding compromises. However, a differentiated public debate is not to be avoided, and the increasing use of personal, digital media accelerates the differentiation trend. While the Internet is often seen as an obvious argument in favour of deliberative models of democracy, it also poses some serious challenges, due to increasing fragmentation and complexity. When we examine the basic normative assumptions of the idea of a public sphere, it becomes clear that the Internet and personal media bring about changes in conjunction with other transformations in society, which pose both new problems and solutions to democracy.

While digital media bring increasing participation (and inequalities), fresh viewpoints and new solutions, it is harder to see how they enable consolidation and overview. I do not argue that personal media are antithetical to the idea of a public sphere, but that they contribute much more to diversity than to convergence. The legitimacy and effectiveness of the public sphere and democracy as a whole are dependent not only on diversity, but also on coherence. How is the modern public sphere able to tackle its own indeterminacy, fragmentation and complexity? In Habermas’s model, procedural debates ensure that consensus does not have to rely on common ethical values to be actualised. The model assumes pluralism, not ethical conformity. This, however, requires that the discursive threads in various media and fora actually become connected. This is not necessarily the case with the Internet. Both sociology and media studies have focused on individualisation and the dependence of the individual on expert systems. The consequences for the public sphere have been underestimated.

The mass media front the public sphere vis-à-vis the national political systems. This will be the state of things for many years to come. The reason for this is not simply technological conservatism, but is related to the structural features of the
media as suitable carriers for a public sphere with democratic and political ambitions. The mass media are characterised by a rupture between the senders and their many receivers, thus with limited possibilities for feedback. This essential feature allows for public opinion to disseminate and circulate among elites and intellectuals, to be dealt with by languages of expertise, to transform into relatively consensual bodies of ideas, and to be easily scanned by the political system. Voices of opinion have the possibility to observe, to understand and to learn from one another.

Whereas big media like national public service broadcasting and the larger quality newspapers can be regarded as main arenas for a public sphere, political deliberation is increasingly intermedial, in that discourse circulates through very different kinds of media, from amateur blogs to *The Financial Times*. The question of the media’s influence on public discourse is therefore a more complex question than in the previous mass mediated (and unmediated) public sphere. However, whereas the post-modern approach ignores the legitimacy question entirely, I have argued that it is essential to distinguish between media of diversity and media of focus. Whereas the first group of media enhances pluralism of topics for society, the latter represents what can potentially become the agenda for formal politics. Whereas the Internet still tends to belong to the first group, elite quality newspapers and some broadcasting programmes tend to represent the latter group. Thus, in spite of the widespread intermediality of the polyphony of public communication, the specifics of various media types tend to coincide with the two dimensions of the political public sphere.

We see two approaches to political legitimacy and liberalism: The public use of politics, vs. the political use of publics. The latter refers to the realist emphasis on self-legitimation and the public sphere as an arena and a scene for rhetorical performance. I do not claim that the two must be mutually exclusive in their practices. In that respect, they need not be so very different as seen as practical politics. But they are certainly connected to rival theoretical perspectives. The first has Kantian roots, while the second has Machiavellian roots. The latter perspective, the courting, winning and maintaining of political power in modern democracies depends on public opinion. Modern politics is to a large extent a drama played out in front of audiences of spectators and debates. This kind of politics must draw on morality (obligation, responsibility, rights) and gives an impression of what the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott called ‘politics of faith’. With a closer look, what is played out is a political use of moral publics.

In a realist view, the public sphere is as much a product of politics and law as of reason and morality of the popular sovereignty. Social movements and NGOs in
civil society that are not aware of this fact will not be heard or attract interest and they would not attain sufficient efficiency. They know that political authorities use their prime resources: regulations and decisions, not as something subordinated to reason and morality. It is my opinion that a sober, cool-headed and descriptive analysis of political communication can operate critically, much in the same way as the wise general assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy army or the opposing football team. Morality plays its role, but it cannot play out at the centre of a theory of politics, without blinding itself to a series of real-political elements of politics. In a non-normative sense the public space is concerned with the maintenance and regulation of authority. The public sphere, space or opinion is only one of several sites of legitimacy and legitimation in order to secure the stability of the political regime or system, mainly for the purpose of preserving stability. These are perhaps uncomfortable thoughts. John Gray argues that realism as a political theory may be too uncomfortable for a culture that prizes psychological comfort above anything else: ‘...it is a reasonable question whether western liberal societies are capable of the moral effort that is involved in setting aside hopes of world-transformation.’ (Gray 2007, 272–73)

In the public space, politics is made public, and so is the response of the individuals who are organised into the constellation we call a public sphere. By the very positioning from the private to the public, a totality is constructed that demonstrates the non-violent power, but nevertheless power, of politics. By ordering and lining up individuals into a public structural constellation, much of the legitimation work is in fact done, energising the efficiency of politics. A sociological theory should thus be rigged that can both account for this realistic situation, and sharpen its focus on the actual functionality of politics and the public opinion in a way that enables sociology and political theory to criticise their functioning in basic way. Rather than a critical-normative and reconstructive strategy, we may explore the many proposals for a non-normative understanding of public debate, from Machiavelli via Weber and Lippman to Luhmann. The central idea of contingency makes very clear for a realist that there is only an accidental ideal-rational basis for political visions, or utopian thinking.

What constitutes a basic difference between moral liberalism and realistic liberalism is that moralists, following the dogmas of Enlightenment, consider politics to be an unfinished activity ('project') about completing or improving democracy. However, politics is the circulation of political communication that takes place now, even if its topics always refer to the future. A constant challenge for political power is to refer to prospected hopes (political promises and visions) in order to gain support in the present. The fact that these promises or visions can
never be met must be compensated with political techniques for generating at least minimalist legitimacy through symbolist or symbolic politics and leadership (Bourdieu, Weber) rhetoric, stylisation, TV-charisma, etc. Such fabrication of trust is therefore endemic to the public sphere. We cannot make our judgements on politics, as Pierre Bourdieu noted, without the symbolic in mind. The same goes for structural features of institutions, the creative use of time (delaying and speeding up) in decision processes. All talk about the (improved) future is meant for the present. While liberal political theory provides politics with ideology in the form of utopias, realist theory provides liberals with hypothetical disillusionment.

The irony is that the deliberative and realist approaches have swapped normative political functions: While the deliberative approach, once a post-Marxist, critical approach, stood against dominating liberal versions of aggregative and managerial versions, the approach of political realism and political systems theory is today the approach to democracy with a critical potential. The deliberative approach has achieved success and is largely co-opted politically and constitutionally – as the necessary ingredient in a true democracy today, at national and international levels. Public deliberation (including the conditions for the press and debates on the Internet, etc.) of political issues is the standard by which we measure our democratic maturity. In certain constitutions, the public debate is formally subsumed under the responsibility of the state. The semantics of the deliberative approach has become the language of national governments and the EU Commission. Deliberative political theory now supplies legitimating ideas for a federal EU guarding free markets. Against this, political realism offers to continue the Weberian tradition of unmasking political power, including strategies for self-legitimation and control.

While the deliberative approach has been included in the self-description of politics and now serves as helpful fiction, a realist approach describes politics and democracy precisely as fictions and realities.

The time to posit universal reason has passed. Today, the world is spinning around by way of ironic contradictions and paradoxes that the political theorist needs to bring up to the light. I think that a more realistic notion would be to settle for exposure of unhappy paradoxes and possibly to avoid the worst catastrophes. Marx is at his best when analysing the birth of industrial capitalism, hardly in his brief sketches and vision of communism. Freedom, justice and equality are obvious demands made by people all over the world who are experiencing the opposite. They are however abstract dreams – even ideology – when referred to in social and political theory. To argue analytically that a better future would somehow come out of the current irrational, exploitative, and ecologically disastrous capitalism implies improbable idealism. When realism fails to identify a historical
subject or any progressive alternative, it is because there aren’t any. This is not pessimism or scepticism, terms too often invested with morality. What Bernard Williams calls ‘The first question of the state’ can be no other but to protect the citizen from external threats. The most important good is the absence of evil. Realism of a Marxist or Weberian kind need not moralise further, only pinpoint the catastrophic mistakes that have been and are being done. One is left to ‘articulate suffering, explain the root causes of the systematic destruction of humanity and the rest of nature, and unmask irrationalities embedded in social structures and day-to-day life.’ (Gunderson 2015, 33–34) Modern realists as different as Niklas Luhmann, Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss all turn the non-idealising approach toward idealising in a critical manner, and address the latter as a pleasant self-image or as ideology in a Marxist sense.

Idealism views politics normatively as an ethical practice and involves a model of human (political) behaviour as moral behaviour in order for society to be organised in a good and just way. Exactly what kind of morality and good society would vary among writers within the camp of political idealism. However, this realism does not necessarily lead to conservatism or reactionary ideas, not even resignation, since its task must be to demonstrate and explain irrationality. In opposition to ideal theory, the task is to not redistribute ideology about a better world ahead, but account for the hijacked possibilities. Realism, as I have indicated, begins with the political. The closest we get to a norm for a realist understanding of democratic politics is probably stability, as absence of arbitrary power. Justice and the good society exist as internal to politics, as ammunition for the contesters and as the self-understanding of politics in general. The system of political pluralism organised as political parties and geographical constituencies is conceived of the democratic realisation that there exist different and contradictory notions of what is just in society. As soon as we bring in the connections to the people through regular elections and the public sphere, we are back to the ‘ethics first’ view of liberal and deliberalist approaches. (Geuss 2008) There is no genuinely political conception of justice. (Rossi 2012, 157)

What we have come to call the public sphere is the mechanism by which the political system speaks of social order under conditions of reflexivity and complexity. It is the way the political system operates rationally, by adjusting the environment to politics and by adjusting itself to the environment. The main discursively-based agreement between state and society is this public rhetoric under the conditions of history and contingency.

On top of the agenda of an Internet realism on politics is I think another burning issue, and here I rephrase insights from Jane Mansbridge (2014): There is an
increasing need for legitimacy in order to make the necessary sacrifices to solve a series of problems (climate change being probably the biggest; crises of finance, debt, social inequality, terrorism and migration being others). At the same time, legitimacy for coercive state action, for reasons of individualism, failed policies, corruption, media cynicism, etc. tends to decrease. How will political power apply digital media to handle this dilemma?