Why the Net is not a Public Sphere

1 author:

Jodi Dean
Hobart and William Smith Colleges

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Jodi Dean

What is the relation between the idea of the public sphere and computer-mediated interaction? I argue that the notion of the public sphere is not only inapplicable to the Net, but also and more importantly, that it is damaging to practices of democracy under conditions of contemporary technoculture, conditions Manuel Castells theorizes as capitalism in the information mode of development and which I refer to as communicative capitalism.[1] As an alternative to the public sphere, I consider the potential of a political architecture rooted in a notion of networks. To the extent that such an architecture can center democratic practice in conflict and contestation, so can it open up the democratic imagination in the networked societies of communicative capitalism.

I. What is the Public Sphere? What Kind of Political Architecture Does It Involve?

Most generally put, the public sphere is the site and subject of liberal democratic practice. It is that space within which people deliberate over matters of common concern, matters that are contested and about which it seems necessary to reach a consensus.

Versions of this notion of the public sphere appear in legal distinctions between public and private spheres, where public refers to the state and private refers to the market and the family. Likewise, invocations of some sort of public are frequent in newspaper and campaign rhetoric. From public opinion polls to statements like "the public was outraged to learn" and "the public has a right to know," we find an idea of the public as that general audience whose opinions matter, as those whose agreement or disagreement could change the course of elections or make or break a play, movie, or television show.

Political theorists have conceptualized the public sphere in various ways. Hannah Arendt anchors her notion of the public sphere in a particular understanding of the politics of ancient Greece.[2] For Arendt, what is important about the public sphere is that it is a place of freedom and contestation separate from the demands of work and the necessities of bare life. In contrast, Richard Sennett reads the public sphere more aesthetically, in terms of practices of self-presentation and display.[3] My discussion of the public sphere draws from yet a third conceptualization, that of Jürgen Habermas. His book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, has been vastly influential in numerous

fields from sociology and political science to cultural studies and communications theory.[4] I use Habermas's conception because of its widespread impact, presuming that most normative invocations of the public have something like this in mind.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* not only does Habermas trace the emergence of the notion of the public in key Enlightenment political theories, but he also looks at the material emergence of a sphere of private persons coming together as a public in the eighteenth century in German *Tischgesellschaften*, English coffee houses, and French salons. What Habermas finds in these new associations are a set of political norms crucial for democratic practice. First, there was disregard for social status, a fundamental parity among all participants such that the authority of the better argument could win out over social hierarchy. Second, new areas of questioning and critique were opened up as culture itself was produced as a commodity to be consumed. Third, the newly emerging public was, in principle, open and inclusive. Anyone could access that which was discussed in the public sphere. These abstractions lead Habermas, fourth, to conceptualize the public sphere in terms of the public use of reason.

So, we have a set of norms: equality, transparency, inclusivity, rationality. These norms apply to actions within the public sphere. But what is the public sphere? What is its architecture more basically? I understand the architecture of the public sphere to be based on the following components: site, goal, means, norms, and vehicle. What Habermas has in mind with his account of the public sphere and what tends to be assumed, even if only tacitly, in invocations of the public, are actors meeting face to face according to legal or rational deliberative procedures in order to come to agreement on a matter of national interest. The actors are conceptualized as free and rational agents, as citizens who make rational choices about their interests, who have looked into various alternatives and made a coherent, explicable choice. Their deliberations with others are thought of, again, in terms of rational discussions, if not exactly between friends, then at least not between enemies or even strangers. These are people who simply disagree on the matter at hand but share enough common conceptions to have a discussion – and this makes sense, of course, given that the site is the nation.

This conception of the public sphere has been heavily criticized – it never existed, it excluded women, it was built on the backs of the working class.[5] Habermas himself has changed his mind about key aspects of it, even though he still thinks that the norms of the public sphere are those crucial for deliberative democracy.

But, even with the critique of details, the concept itself is widely used and championed. Current uses of the idea of the public attempt to sidestep these problems by adding an "s." They talk about subaltern oppositional counter publics, trading on the normative currency of the concept while trying to avoid its exclusionary dimensions.[6] These attempts to save the concept by adding an "s" to it are not successful: if the groups all have the same norms, then they are part of one

public in the Habermasian sense; if they do not have the same norms, if they are exclusive, partial, oriented around specific concerns and interests, then they are not publics but different sorts of groups – interest groups, say. This is important because, to use the example of identity politics, it is precisely the exclusivity of the group that is crucial for its group-ness; it isn't supposed to be a public at all.[7]

The idea of the public sphere has been reinvigorated in part because of the emergence of new communication technologies. Habermas thinks that "the phenomenon of a world public sphere" is today "becoming political reality for the first time in a cosmopolitan matrix of communication."[8] In the early nineties, moreover, the Internet was hyped as an information superhighway and a town hall for millions. And, recently, ICANN expert Michael Froomkin has argued that the Internet Standards process not only follows but provides empirical validation of Habermas's account of the communicative justification of action norms.[9]

Computer-mediated interactions seem to materialize aspirations long associated with the public sphere. Contemporary technoculture itself sometimes seems a machinery produced by the very ideals inspiring democracy. Clearly, advances in computer-mediated interaction provide ever greater numbers of people with access to information. No longer a privilege of the elite, information is available to anyone with a computer. Similarly, more people have opportunities to register their thoughts and opinions in political discussions than ever before. Chatrooms, cybersalons, and ezines are just some of the new electronic spaces in which people can participate as equals in processes of collective will formation. Describing the early nineties ecstasy over the possibilities of computer democracy, Hubertus Buchstein writes:

> If one accepts the claims of the optimists, the new technology seems to match all the basic requirements of Habermas's normative theory of the democratic public sphere: it is a universal, anti-hierarchical, complex, and demanding mode of interaction. Because it offers universal access, uncoerced communication, freedom of expression, an unrestricted agenda, participation outside of traditional political institutions and generates public opinion through processes of discussion, the Internet looks like the most ideal speech situation.[10]

But is the Net really a public sphere? Does the notion of a public sphere help us think better about networked communications?

II. What's Wrong with This Picture?

I claimed at the outset that the Net is nothing like a public sphere. I now defend this claim with two moves. First, I consider how public sphere norms appear in cybertheory. They appear in two completely opposed ways: as cyberia's lack and as its excess. Second, I take this oscillation as an indication of the need for a broader framework of analysis, one that inquires into the interests served by thinking of the Net in terms of a public sphere. Put in old-fashioned terms, I

consider the problem of configuring the Net as a public sphere as one that can be addressed through ideology critique.[11] That is, the characterization of networked communication as lacking public sphere norms on the one hand, and as plagued by a surfeit of these norms, on the other, tells us a lot about the ideology materialized in the Internet. I argue that it is an ideology of publicity in the service of communicative capitalism.

A. *Lack, or Why Doesn't the Net Look More Like the Public Sphere?*

Many common complaints about the Internet are anchored in an ideal of the public sphere. Early concerns regarding the Net's domination by young, white, American men echoed the critique of the bourgeois public sphere for excluding women, ethnic and racial minorities, and the working class. The key issue was inclusion: all that cyberspace needed to really be the public sphere was to be more inclusive. Similarly, as greater numbers of less experienced users came online, hostile environment issues emerged: was cyberspace too sexist, too racist, too offensive? Did it operate according to norms of equality and rationality, decency and civility? And, if it didn't, what sorts of architectures might better secure these norms?

These are but a few of the most general ways that networked communications link up with the idea of the public sphere. More interesting are the deeper levels at which public sphere assumptions are encoded. In the introduction to *Resisting the Virtual Life*, James Brook and Iain Boal write that:

> virtual technologies are pernicious when their simulacra of relationships are deployed societywide as substitutes for face-to-face interactions, which are inherently richer than mediated interactions. Nowadays, the monosyllabic couch potato is joined by the information junkie in passive admiration of the little screen; this passivity is only refined and intensified by programmed 'interactivity.'[12]

This sort of criticism is rooted in the assumption that the Net should be more like a public sphere, that the faults of the Net are those points at which it fails to achieve public sphereness. Its basic point is that the Net lacks what it needs to be a proper public sphere.

These assumptions support Brook and Boal's worry about "subsitution," one, and their resulting displacement of the Net by television, two.

Brook and Boal worry that networked interactions will substitute for face-to-face interactions. For them, face-to-face interactions are more natural and hence better than actions that are not face to face. But, the idea of a face-to-face interaction needs to be understood as imaginary, as a fantasy that relies on its opposition to "mediated interactions" for it claim to be "inherently richer." All interactions are mediated; there is no pure, immediate, fully-present, fully-transparent encounter. But, by worrying that computer-mediated interactions will

"substitute" for face-to-face ones, Brook and Boal occlude this fact. And, this occlusion, this naturalization and idealization of face-to-face interactions, in effect *produces* the subject of these interactions as an embodied individual richly interconnected with significant others in significant, real relationships – none of which, presumably, are mediated at all. Therefore, the worry about substitution in effect produces the individuated agent of the public sphere.

Furthermore, in their emphasis on face-to-face interactions in contrast to the simulacra of technologically-mediated relationships, Brook and Boal associate unity with allegedly natural interactions and fragmentation with technology: the person (that they created through the opposition between face to face and mediation) is alone, passively consuming information in front of a screen. But this is weird – what happened to the technologically-mediated relationship? Now the person in their account is totally alone. The interaction is completed displaced by the screen. The screen now seems to be a television screen, not a computer screen at all – hence their reference to the monosyllabic couch potato. And, this displacement lets them treat the person in front of the screen as a junkie, as an information addict, injected with stuff. So, the Net is not a vehicle for rational discussion at all: it's television, injecting banalities into passive consumer-junkies.

Brooks and Boal thus fault the Net for lacking key components of the public sphere: individuated agents as the vehicle for discussion and rational, active participants in a reasonable, worthwhile exchange.

B. Excess, or OHMYGOD! The Net is the Public Sphere!

Other commentators on computer-mediated interaction see the Net as being too much like the public sphere. For them, the Net realizes the ideals of the public, and that's precisely the problem with it. In a 1998 article in *Brill's Content*, Esther Dyson complained that the Net

> allows all kinds of people to enter the conversation. There are still reliable and unreliable sources, but for now, as people move onto the Net, they tend to lose their common sense and believe all kinds of crazy tales and theories. Unfortunately, we as a society haven't learned 'Net literacy' yet. We take a story's appearance online, as well as in print, as proof that it has been subjected to rigorous journalistic standards, but there's so much stuff out there that no one has the time to contradict all the errors.[13]

Dyson does not specify which conversation she has in mind, so it is difficult to know what exactly she is trying to protect. Presumably, she's thinking about something like the public sphere, something in which "we as a society" participate, something that requires a "common" sense. What might such an all-inclusive conversation look like?

Dyson's horror at the thought of "all kinds of people" entering it tells us, first, that the possibility of an inclusive public sphere conjures up anxieties around

truth and trust; and, second, that what she defends as the public sphere relies on a conception of rational debate that excludes all but the reasonable few. Who exactly loses her common sense and believes crazy theories because of a cruise on the Web? Dyson suggests that it must be those who are ignorant and unsophisticated, those of us who don't have authorities to tell us what to believe. Moreover, she suggests, in light of the underlying epistemology of the public sphere, that there is one truth and that there are experts out there who know this truth and who should be empowered to enlighten the rest of us. This contention flies in the face of important research on knowledge networks, situated knowledges, and the structures that authorize what is to count as knowledge in specific domains. Moreover, it fails to grasp precisely the epistemological purchase of truth conditions in cyberia: given the competing conceptions of the real meeting and clashing on the Web, the authorizations previously presumed to attach to one set of knowledge claims (assumed by those with control over dominant institutions of knowledge production) are seen in all their actual conflict with competing claims.[14] And this is not a relativist position; this is a position that emphasizes precisely that point of conflict that Dyson rejects with her emphasis on consensus.

So, for Dyson, the problem with the Net is the very excess that makes it a public sphere – everyone is included: the ignorant, the ill-informed, the unauthorized. There is too much equality, too much inclusivity. Dyson's point boils down to the complaint that there are too many different opinions and ideas out there on the Net. But too many for what? What is the criterion according to which one can assess too many or too few? I suggest that the criterion, yet again, is the consensus that is the goal of discussion in the public sphere. Precisely because she presupposes that the Net is something like a public sphere, Dyson can worry about too many opinions – she thinks there needs to be agreement.

In complaints of both lack and excess, the invocation of the public, or the territorialization of cyberia as a public, functions to authorize regulatory interventions.[15] Too little security, too little trust to be able to know that one is dealing with rational, fully individuated agents? Better install some sorts of mechanisms that can let us know who one is, codes that will warrant the other person as a responsible subject.[16] Too many opinions? Too many voices? Better put in filters so that the real authorities can be recognized.[17] But if cyberia really is the public sphere, if it really does let in all the voices and opinions and give equal access to all within its domain, what is the problem? Put somewhat differently, why exactly is it a nightmare of inclusion? What is the base line from which *this* is measured? The answer is global capital, or, in a term I take from Paul A. Passavant, communicative capitalism.[18] These regulatory interventions are invoked and pursued so as to make the Net safe for commercial exchange, to protect the Intranets of financial markets, 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.

C. Publicity as the Ideology of Technoculture

These two contradictory accounts of the Net as a public sphere suggest that it might be more productive to treat the public sphere as an ideological construct and subject it to ideology critique. As theorized by Slavoj Žižek, ideology refers to the "generative matrix that regulates the relationship between the visible and the non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable, as well as changes in this relationship."[19] My claim is that a notion of public in the sense of visible, accessible, and known operates together with a notion of secrecy in the sense of hidden, inaccessible, and unknown in a matrix that configures how democracy is imagined in contemporary technoculture.[20] If the public aspires to inclusivity, transparency, and reconciliation, then the secret holds open these aspirations via the promise that a democratic public is within reach – once all that is hidden has been revealed. Along with networked communications and practices of education and informatization, technologies of surveillance and practices of dissemination are installed to fulfill these promises, to bring everything before the gaze of the public. Publicity works through demands to disclose or reveal the secret and realize the public as the ideal self-identical subject/object of democracy.

Publicity, in other words, is the ideology of technoculture.

In contrast with other Marxist theorizations, the Žižekian account of ideology does not involve false consciousness and ideology critique does not involve unmasking this falsity to reveal an underlying truth. Instead, Žižek upgrades the concept of ideology in order to apply it to a cynical age. Precisely because cynicism incorporates an ironic distance from everyday social reality, unmasking is clearly pointless. People know very well that they are playing into the hands of advertisers, say, but they do it nevertheless, despite their knowledge of what is going on. For Žižek, then, ideology refers to the beliefs involved when we go ahead and do something *nevertheless*. Ideology affects what we do, not what we know.

Furthermore, insofar as ideology refers to practices of belief, it has a profoundly material dimension. Belief is exteriorized in cultural practices, institutions, and technologies. When we "go through the motions" despite what we know, we uphold, reinforce these institutions. Thus, rather than designating the interior disposition of an individual, belief, again persists at the level of actions and in those practical, technological, conditions that produce them. I contend that today these conditions are best understood as the materialization of norms of publicity.

Technoculture, as I mentioned, is often heralded for the ways it enhances democracy by realizing the conditions for an ideal public. From virtual town halls to the chat and opining of apparently already politicized netizens, computer mediated interaction has been proffered as democracy's salvation. New technologies seem to solve the old republican worry about whether deliberative democracy can work in societies too big for face-to-face discussion. In technoculture we can have

the privilege and convenience of democracy without the unsightly mess as millions and millions of people participate in a great big public sphere.

Or at least that's the fantasy. New media present themselves for and as a democratic public. They present themselves *for* a democratic public in their eager offering of information, access, and opportunity. They present themselves *as* a democratic public when the very fact of networked communications comes to mean democratization, when expansions in the infrastructure of the information society are assumed to be enactments of a demos. But, as is becoming increasingly clear, the expansion and intensification of communication and entertainment networks yields not democracy but something else entirely: communicative capitalism.

In communicative capitalism, what has been heralded as central to Enlightenment ideals of democracy takes material form in new technologies. Access, information, and communication, as well as open networks of discussion and opinion-formation, are conditions for rule by the public that seem to have been realized through global telecommunications. But instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's people. As Saskia Sassen's research on the impact of economic globalization on sovereignty and territoriality makes clear, the speed, simultaneity, and interconnectivity of electronic telecommunications networks produce massive distortions and concentrations of wealth. Not only does the possibility of super-profits in the finance and services complex lead to hypermobility in capital and the devalorization of manufacturing, but financial markets themselves acquire the capacity to discipline national governments.[21] Similarly, within nations like the US, the proliferation of media has been accompanied by a shift in political participation. Rather than actively organized in parties and unions, politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practices centered on advertising, public relations, and the means of mass communication. Indeed, with the commodification of communication, more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle as if the valuation itself had been rewritten in binary code. Bluntly put, the standards of a finance and consumption-driven entertainment culture set the very terms of democratic governance today. In effect, changing the system, organizing against and challenging communicative capitalism, seems to require strengthening the system: how else to get out the message than to raise the money, buy the television time, register the domain names, build the websites, and craft the accessible, user-friendly, spectacular message? Democracy demands publicity.

So, we are at an impasse: the ideal of the public works simultaneously to encode democratic practice and market global technoculture. Precisely those technologies that materialize a promise of full political access and inclusion drive an economic formation whose brutalities render democracy worthless for the

majority of people. The meme: *publicity is to technoculture what liberalism is to capitalism.* It is the ideology that constitutes the truth conditions of global, information-age capital. Publicity is what makes today's communicative capitalism seem perfectly natural.

The ideal of publicity configures the Net as a consensual space. Not only does this pathologize all sorts of interactions long part of computer mediated communication – sex, porn, games, banal chatter – but it completely occludes the way that the Net is the key infrastructural element of the global economy. We see this in ICANN statements that emphasize the importance of competition on the Net. Competition is associated with the public good, with what is best for all people. This reappears in "Third Way" rhetoric: the market is public; the market registers and serves the public interest. Market competition as public good displaces attention from the actual antagonisms, the actual conflict going on in the world in various forms and spaces. The Net is one of the spaces where this conflict rages in full-force. When we talk about the Net as a public sphere, we displace attention from this conflict.

In fact, even though Habermas's recent work seems to involve a shift away from consensus, his equation of networked communications with the public similarly erases antagonism. Briefly put, Habermas draws from the writings of nineteenth-century German democrat Julius Froebel to suggest a notion of the public as "the medium for a multivocal process of opinion-formation that substitutes mutual understanding for power and rationally motivates majoritarian decisions."[22] The public mediates dissent so as to produce an understanding that will take the place of power; put somewhat differently, it is a means of legitimation. The public sphere supplies "communicatively generated power," a store of discursively validated reasons from which the administrative system (the state) can draw in its efforts to steer society. On the one hand, these reasons arise out of organized processes of political will-formation at the level of parties and elections. On the other hand, the organized processes are themselves sustained by the more amorphous, even organic, communicative cultures in which they are embedded. The legitimacy of political processes, in other words, requires that these processes remain "permeable to the free-floating values, issues, contributions, and arguments of a surrounding political communication that, as such, cannot be *organized* as a whole."[23] For Habermas, the interplay between these two levels of political discussion – "institutionally structured political will-formation and spontaneous, unsubverted circuits of communication" – supplies the normative dimension of the public sphere – it grounds the "normative expectation of rational outcomes."[24]

What are the attributes of this disorganized sphere? First, it is not exactly a sphere. Rather, the disorganized sphere designates a plurality of communicatively networked yet diffuse, dispersed autonomous spheres. These spheres form opinions spontaneously. They are effective only indirectly. They generate practical convictions. "They specialize, that is, in discovering issues relevant for all of

society, contributing possible solutions to problems, interpreting values, producing good reasons, and invalidating others."[25]

There are number of difficulties with Habermas's account. At the most basic level are questions regarding the prior organization of communication through the economy and through biopolitical productions of raced and sexed bodies. Under these conditions of asymmetrical power, what can it mean to call some spheres autonomous and some values free-floating? And, is it not the case that what counts as a good reason depends on the structure of power and knowledge in which the reason emerges? Finally, given the pervasiveness of consumption- and entertainment-driven technoculture, how is it possible to talk about the spontaneous formation of opinions? It is hardly an exaggeration to point out that nearly every item that enters the media stream has been tested, focus-grouped, prodded, and shaped to meet with, if not broad approval, then at least niche acceptance. The very technologies and media traversing societies and linking various sectors are produced by and reproduce communicative capitalism. In an odd way, the ideal of autonomous spheres and free-floating, spontaneous reasons and values seems a fantasy of a disconnected life, a life liberated from the networks of global corporate technoculture.

Drawing from Albrecht Wellmer, Habermas argues that the public sphere understood as communications medium provides a dispersed, decentralized model of sovereignty. He writes:

> sovereignty is found in those subjectless forms of communication that regulate the flow of discursive opinion- and will-formation in such a way that their fallible outcomes have the presumption of practical reason on their side. Subjectless and anonymous, an intersubjectively dissolved popular sovereignty withdraws into democratic procedures and the demanding communicative presuppositions of their implementation.[26]

This is precisely my worry about the public sphere in communicative capitalism: the technologies, the concentrations of corporate power, the demands of financial markets, the seductions of the society of the spectacle that rule in and as the name of the public have created conditions anathema to democratic governance. The subjectless flows of communication are sovereign – and that is the problem.

III. What Might Be Better?

So, if the Net is not the public sphere, what is it? Is it just a tool or a medium? Not if by that one means to employ a model of technology that is not always already a materialization of particular ideologies, beliefs, aspirations. Is the Net better understood in terms of virtual reality? Absolutely not: not only is it real in the sense that real people use it, remaining within their bodies and retaining their physical capacities, but it is a very real component of the economic formation that now impacts the entire planet. To emphasize its virtuality displaces attention from its economic role.

Perhaps the Net is best understood as a site at which multiple realities converge. Again, absolutely not. The idea of multiple realities is one of the most pernicious today. There is one reality. It is a site of conflict. It is multiple to the extent that there are multiple approaches to it, but each of these approaches has political effects, effects that reach far beyond those who allegedly accept a particular reality. Put somewhat differently, to claim that there are multiple realities is to fall into traps similar to those that affect those who see the Net as a public sphere. It is to avoid acknowledging the conflicts and antagonisms manifest within, pervading, and structuring the Net.

Admittedly, I often find myself in agreement with the view that the Net is nothing at all – that all of contemporary society should be understood as cyberia, as awash in a sea of flows and links and networks such that to isolate one communicative infrastructure on the basis of technology alone makes no sense. Nevertheless, the Net generally and the Web more specifically play key roles in configuring the contemporary communicative capitalist imaginary. The Net is a site of conflict over the meaning, practice, and shape of the global. To that extent, how and what it represents is inseparable from what it does. The Net is the architecture for communicative capitalism, both as an order establishing itself and as an order being resisted.

Consequently, I suggest that the Net be theorized as a "zero institution." This term comes from Lévi-Strauss as explained by Slavoj Žižek.[27] A "zero institution" is an empty signifier that itself has no determinate meaning but that signifies the presence of meaning. It is an institution with no positive function at all: all it does is signal the actuality of social institutions as opposed to pre-institutional chaos. Such zero institutions appear in political theory in Machiavelli's Prince and Rousseau's Legislator. As institutions, they signify the beginning or founding of something, marking that instance of transformation from the chaotic period prior to the founding. They have no governmental or constitutional role.

Unlike a notion of the public sphere, then, the zero institution makes no normative claims. Indeed, it makes no empirical claims in the sense of being recognized or acknowledged as such by those within the institution; differently put, one would expect dissonant, irreconcilable accounts of any given zero institution. Again, the concept functions simply as a placeholder to designate institutionality as such,

Lévi-Strauss uses the idea of the "zero institution" to explain how members of a tribe are able to think of themselves as members of the same tribe even when they are radically split, even when their very representations of what the tribe is are radically antagonistic to one another. Similarly, Žižek views the nation as a kind of zero institution, and he adds that sexual difference should also be understood as a zero institution. Whereas the nation is the zero institution of society's unity, sexual difference is the zero institution of society's split or fundamental antagonism.

The Web is also a zero institution: it enables myriad conflicting constituencies to understand themselves as part of the same global structure even as they disagree over what the architecture of this structure should entail. Indeed, the Web is a particularly powerful form of zero institution insofar as its basic elements seem a paradoxical combination of singularity and collectivity, collision and convergence. It brings together both the unity and split, both the hope and the antagonism, the imaginary and the Real in one site. The fundamental constitutive antagonisms of communicative capitalism are alive and present, coursing through and structuring the Web in diverse, protean, and evolving networks. As the nation has collapsed as a zero institution capable of standing in symbolically for the possibility of social institutions (and we see this collapse all over the place, from the crisis of sovereignty engendered by the WTO, to the crises in the Balkans, to the conflicts over migration and immigration, to the dismantling of the welfare state) and as global economic structures have made their presence felt all the more strongly, the Web has emerged as that zero institution signifying institutionality as such.[28] Likewise, as sexual difference has both been complicated by myriad other differences (sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc.) and as experimentation and blurring and proliferation of sexual difference has thrown into disarray the very possibility of the term, the Web – precisely as a site where all these differences emerge, mutate, and link up into and through networks – seems to take on this aspect of the zero institution as well. Hence, conflict over configuring the Web is at the same time a conflict over the configuration of the world of unity and difference.

Representationally, the Web is a zero institution. It provides an all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is simultaneously expressed and obliterated. It is a global space in which one can recognize oneself as connected to everyone else, as linked to everything that matters. At the same time, it is a space of conflicting networks and networks of conflict so deep and fundamental that even to speak of consensus or convergence seems an act of naïveté at best, violence at worst. Both these dimensions of convergence and conflict hold without canceling each other out or resolving into a process of legitimation or some sort of will-formation that carries with it a supposition of rationality. The Web is communicative capitalism's imaginary of uncontested, yet competitive, global flow. And it is the Real of communicative capitalism, configuring the networks and flows and markets and gambles of the global market. All this is naturalized on, rendered as the nature of, the Web.

It might be objected that my argument to this point emphasizes communicative capitalism to the neglect of non-commercial forms of networked interaction. After all, not just corporations are on the Web. As WTO protest organizing and the emerging peace movement make perfectly clear, activists make important use of networked communications. And the dotcom meltdown proves that commercial applications of the Web are economically as well as ideationally bankrupt.

But, the dotcom meltdown in no way should be read in terms of the demise of communicative capitalism. The introduction of commercially viable new

technologies is always accompanied by phases of proliferation and meltdown as the new technology establishes itself. At points in the early to mid-eighties, as Commodore, Atari, and other early PC companies collapsed, many thought that the personal computer was going the way of the 8-track player. Instead, this was a period of consolidation that relied on the efforts of precisely those companies that died in the struggle. In a more cynical vein, one might speculate that the consumer-oriented period of the late nineties was really part of a strategy to naturalize the Web, to make it a part of everyday life, like banking, even as the real beneficiary was global capital.

The presence of activists is an argument in my favor: the Web is a site of conflict. And this conflictual, contested dimension of the Web needs to be emphasized. Recent work by Richard Rogers and Noortje Marres does just this, suggesting how one might think about democratic politics without relying on a notion of the public sphere.[29] Rogers and Marres have developed a set of software tools in conjunction with a research project on "issue-fication" on the Web.[30] In effect, these tools provide new imaginings of democracy as they enable different practices for navigating through cyberia, practices that do not follow, reproduce, or presuppose the architecture of the public sphere. By following the movement of issues on the Web, Rogers and Marres have been able to identify "issue networks" that are neither publics nor actors. Networks are the flows of communication and contestation that turn matters into issues. But these flows are always and necessarily situated within the hierarchies and inequalities of communicative capitalism.

Using their "netlocator" software to check the Web for information presented by television media as a spectacle regarding French farmers in the streets, Rogers and Marres discover a radically different political configuration: the farmers are absent. What the Web tells them, they write, is

> that the farmers are not farmers, but an organizational figuration that moves from the national to the global and from the political-ideological to the issue-activist. It is quite an organized picture, whereby neither farmers, nor 'phoney farmers,' nor 'a bunch of disorganized anarchists' make up the protests, but a professional national-international network.[31]

Such a "professional" network cannot be elided into either of the two levels of Habermas's new subjectless public sphere of decentered communication flows; it is neither autonomous nor state-centered but instead traverses the socio-political-economic terrain.

As they follow issues on the Web, rather than in more massified media, Rogers and Marres avoid some of the major problems of publicity in technoculture. They are not in the business of trying to decide which actors are worthy, which actors count as actors. They don't decide which knowledge has authority; they let the Web decide.[32] They don't presume a public or an audience in advance. Contestation, argument over issues, is at the center of their analysis – not some fantasy of unity, dream of consensus, or supposition of reason. Furthermore, although

Rogers and Marres treat the Web as a communications medium, they don't romanticize the connections it enables; they politicize them, investigating and challenging the practices of linking employed in issue networks. In fact, their research on the influence of .coms and .govs in "issue-fication" clarifies the ways in which all links are not equal. The configurations of networks change as various players enter or leave the network, as they strategically link to specific sites within the network, and as certain sites lose or gain in prominence. (I should add that Rogers and Marres demonstrate the difference in attention cycles between issues on the Web and news in the media. This is a powerful challenge to an idea of "real time" that has become limited to the time it takes to type a sentence, refresh a screen, or change a channel.)

What sort of democratic practice does not rely on an ideal of the public? If we take Rogers and Marres' advice and "follow the issues," we get, not exactly a set of democratic norms and procedures, not a democratic public sphere, but more or less democratic configurations that we might think of as "neodemocracies." Neodemocracies are configured through contestation and conflict. They reject the fantasy of a public and instead work from the antagonisms that animate political life.

	Public Sphere	**Neodemocracies**
Site	Nation	Web as zero-institution
Goal	Consensus (legitimation)	Contestation
Means	Procedures (legal, rational)	Networked conflict
Norms	Inclusivity	Duration
	Equality	Hegemony
	Transparency	Decisiveness
	Rationality	Credibility
Vehicle	Actors	Issues

The public sphere was a formation tied to the nation. Given the challenges to national sovereignty under globally communicative capitalism, this spatiality limits our political imagination as it fails to acknowledge the new conditions of politics, knowledge, and affiliation today. As a beginning point, then, neodemocracies should be understood as situated in a different zero-institution, the Web. Just like the nation, the Web is a zero-institution that posits the possibility of institutionality over chaos. Unlike the nation and like sexual difference, the Web uses the very presence of conflict and antagonism to signify institutionality. Paradoxically perhaps, contestation itself signifies collectivity. And this is what thinking about the Web in terms of a public overlooks.

As theorized by Habermas, the public sphere has been the site of political legitimation, the locus of discussion and debate over matters of common concern. But, as a sphere whose telos is consensus, or even a supposition of rational procedures

and reasonable outcomes, the public posits a fantasy of unity, a commonality of understanding that covers over the fundamental antagonisms dividing social and political life. In contrast, neodemocratic networks are contestatory networks, networks of engagement around issues of vital concern to their constituents. These networks accept that democracy is animated by a split: they thrive on this split, acknowledging the committed endeavors of those engaged in struggle. By focusing on contestation instead of consensus, then, neodemocracy acknowledges the unavoidable antagonisms of political life. This is especially important today as Third Way advocates seek to obscure the reality of the fundamental cleavages wrought by the new economy and as the ideology of publicity tells us that communicative capitalism is really about competition – not conflict.

Neodemocratic politics is not rooted in figuring out the best sorts of procedures and decision rules for political deliberation. Instead, it acknowledges in advance the endless, morphing variety of political tools and tactics. What is crucial to these tactics, however, is whether they open up opportunities for contestation. Not all tactics are equal; those that are part of a neodemocratic arsenal are those that challenge rather than reinforce communicative capitalism.

The norms articulated together by the notion of the public were important to utopian imaginings of democracy. Unfortunately, they have been coopted by a communicative capitalism that has turned them into their opposite. For this reason, it may well be necessary to abandon them – if only to realize them. Hence, instead of prioritizing inclusivity, equality, transparency, and rationality, neodemocratic politics emphasizes duration, hegemony, decisiveness, and credibility.

Any transformative politics today will have to grapple with the speed of global telecommunications and the concomitant problems of data glut and information dumping. Instead of giving into the drive for spectacle and immediacy that plagues an audience-oriented news cycle, the issue networks of neodemocracy work to maintain links among those specifically engaged with a matter of concern. Indeed, linking itself is tactical, a tool of alliance and inclusion, as well as conflict and exclusion. Although the outcomes of these practices may be deeply embedded within already existing power relations, linking does not presuppose the technocratic rule of the experts. Rather, it builds from the extensions of access, information, and know-how enabled by networked communications and uses them to value various strengths, perspectives, and knowledges developed by people with varying degrees of interest and expertise. Put somewhat differently, the valuation of duration as opposed to inclusion prioritizes the interest and engagement brought to bear on an issue rather than inclusion for its own sake. Not everyone knows. Not every opinion matters. What does matter is commitment and engagement by people and organizations networked around contested issues.

If contestation and antagonism are at the core of democratic politics, then not every view or way of living is equal. What I mean is that the very notion of a fundamental antagonism involves a political claim on behalf of some modes of

living and against others. These other views, then, are in no way equal – calling them that makes no sense; it basically misses the point of contestation, namely, winning. Usually, in a contested matter, one does not want the other view to coexist happily somewhere, one wants to defeat it. (Examples from US politics might be guns or prayer in public schools. Each side wants to prevent the other side from practicing what it believes or values.) Accordingly, neodemocratic politics are struggles for hegemony.[33] They are partisan, fought for the sake of people's most fundamental beliefs, identities, and practices. Admittedly, at one level my emphasis on hegemony may seem simply to describe politics in technoculture – yes, that's what's going on, a struggle for hegemony. I emphasize it, however, out of a conviction that the democratic left has so emphasized plurality, inclusivity, and equality that it has lost the partisan will to name and fight against an enemy.

The replacing of transparency by decisiveness follows from the critique of publicity as ideology. The politics of the public sphere has been based on the idea that power is always hidden and secret. But clearly this is not the case today. We know full well that corporations are destroying the environment, employing slave labor, holding populations hostage to their threats to move their operations to locales with cheaper labor. All sorts of horrible political processes are perfectly transparent today. The problem is that people don't seem to mind, that they are so enthralled by transparency that they have lost the will to fight (*Look! The chemical corporation really is trying. . . Look! The government explained where the money went. . .*). With this in mind, neodemocracy emphasizes the importance of affecting outcomes. Fully aware that there is always more information available and that this availability is ultimately depoliticizing, neodemocratic politics prioritizes decisiveness. Of course, the outcomes of decisions cannot be predicted in advance. Of course, they can be rearticulated in all sorts of perverse and unexpected ways. But the only way out of communicative capitalism's endless reflexive circuits of discussion is through decisive action. For many, the ever increasing protests against the World Bank and the G8 have been remarkable precisely as these instances of decisive action that momentarily disrupt the flow of things and hint at the possibility of alternatives to communicative capitalism.

Similarly, the neodemocratic politics mapped by issue networks highlights the contemporary priority of credibility over rationality. The ideal of rationality linked to the public sphere highlighted a single set of particular attributes and competences, raising them to the category of the universal. That native knowledges, feminine strengths, and folk remedies, say, were occluded from this rationality has been well documented in recent decades. What we see on the Web, moreover, is the clash of these different levels and styles of knowledge production. What the issue networks show us is how credibility is managed, who is credible to whom, in what articulations, and under what circumstances.

Finally, the key to this imagining of neodemocracy is focusing on issues, not actors. Given the wide acceptance of the critique of the subject, the proliferation of cites to Nietzsche's dictum, "there is no doer behind the deed," the ongoing

experiments with identity and subjectivity throughout technoculture, and the recognition that decisions and actors are always already embedded in networks and systems, it makes sense for critical democratic theory to "follow the issues." Although this may not seem like such a radical move – after all, "concerned citizens" interviewed on television during presidential elections always complain that candidates don't talk enough about the issues – given the emphasis on identity that has been so prominent in work inspired by the new social movements, it is not an insignificant one. Indeed, a democratic theory built around the notion of issue networks could avoid the fantasy of unity that has rendered publicity in technoculture so profoundly depoliticizing. It recognizes that fissures, antagonism, are what give democracy its political strength (something Machiavelli recognized long ago). Democracy, then, may well be a secondary quality that emerges as an effect or a result of other practices, but that can never be achieved when aimed at directly.

Reimagining democracy under conditions of global technoculture is a project that is just beginning. The repercussions of the challenge global financial markets pose to state sovereignty as well as the broader crisis of representation occasioned by the proliferation and expansion of global networks are only now starting to be addressed. One vision, that of communicative capitalism, should not be allowed to provide the matrix through which this reimagining occurs. Indeed, precisely because of the ways publicity functions as the ideology of technoculture, democratic practices and modes of affiliation should be uncoupled from a notion of the public sphere and understood within a different political architecture. I've offered a brief sketch of neodemocratic issue networks as a point from which such an architecture might develop.

NOTES

1. Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
3. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992).
4. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. Thomas Berger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
5. A particularly good collection of these critiques is *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
6. See, for example, Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.
7. For a more developed version of this argument see Jodi Dean, "Civil Society: Beyond the Public Sphere," in *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. David Rasmussen (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
8. Jürgen Habermas, "Citizenship and National Identity," in *Between Facts and Norms*, tr. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998) 514.
9. A. Michael Froomkin, "Habermas@discourse.net: Towards a Critical Theory of Cyberspace", available at www.discourse.net.
10. Hubertus Buchstein, "Bytes that Bite: The Internet and Deliberative Democracy," *Constellations* 4, no. 2 (October 1997): 250.

11. My understanding of ideology critique comes from the work of Slavoj Žižek. See his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989). I summarize this approach to ideology in "Publicity's Secret," *Political Theory* 29, no. 5 (October 2001).

12. James Brook and Iain A. Boal, eds. *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), vii.

13. Esther Dyson, "The End of the Official Story," *Brill's Content* (July/August 1998): 50-51.

14. For an analysis of competing conceptions of the real, see Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

15. For more detailed accounts of this territorialization, see my "Virtual Fears," *Signs* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1999) and "Virtually Citizens," *Constellations* 4, no. 2 (October 1997).

16. On "warranting," see Allucquere Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

17. See David Shenk, *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut* (San Francisco: Harper Edge, 1997).

18. Private communication.

19. Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Žižek (London: Verso, 1941), 1.

20. This is the argument of my book, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

21. Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

22. Habermas, "Popular Sovereignty as Procedure," *Between Facts and Norms*, 476.

23. Ibid., 485.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid. One could imagine redescribing Habermas's two-track model of democratic publicity in terms of Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony. The disorganized sphere would refer to the unsutured realm of the social. The organized sphere would refer to the institutionalized political system. But rather than carrying a supposition of reasonableness or relying on some idea of spontaneity or discursive legitimacy, democratic processes would be described in terms of struggles for hegemony. Hence, the disorganized sphere would be necessarily uneven and impact on the political level would involve the establishment of equivalences among different social sectors.

26. Ibid., 486.

27. Slavoj Žižek, "The Matrix, or The Two Sides of Perversion," available at: http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199912/msg00019.html.

28. I recognize that the events of September 11, 2001 may cast some doubt on this claim. Nevertheless, the hegemonic configuration of a conflict between civilization and barbarism that has come to define the Bush administration's response suggests something beyond what has been traditionally understood as nationalism. See Paul A. Passavant and Jodi Dean, "Representation and the Event," *Theory and Event* 5, no. 4 (2002).

29. I was fortunate enough to be invited to their workshop, "Competing Realities: The Social Lives of Issues on and off the Web," Budapest (July 23–28, 2001).

30. Richard Rogers, *Four Instruments for the Information Society* (forthcoming).

31. Richard Rogers and Noortje Marres, "French scandals on the Web, and on the streets: A small experiment in stretching the limits of reported reality," manuscript.

32. See Noortje Marres and Richard Rogers, "Depluralising the Web, Repluralising Public Debate. The Case of the GM Food Debate on the Web," in Richard Rogers, ed., *Preferred Placement: Knowledge Politics on the Web* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Editions, 2000), 113–36.

33. I rely here on Ernesto Laclau's account of hegemonic struggle, *Emancipations* (London: Verso, 1996).