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ARTICLES

<b>Siho Nam</b>	
Critical Media Literacy as Curricular Praxis: Remapping the Pedagogical Borderlands of Media Literacy in U.S. Mass Communication Programmes	5
<b>Todd Graham</b>	
Talking Politics Online within Spaces of Popular Culture: The Case of the Big Brother Forum	25
<b>Leopoldina Fortunati</b>	
<b>John O'Sullivan</b>	
<b>Lilia Raycheva</b>	
<b>Halliki Harro-Loit</b>	
Interactivity as a Metaphor of Online News	43
<b>Brett Ommen</b>	
On the Relationship between Voice and Authority in On Message Communication	63
<b>Phil Ramsey</b>	
Journalism, Deliberative Democracy and Government Communication: Normative Arguments from Public Sphere Theory	81
<b>POVZETKI</b>	
<b>ABSTRACTS IN SLOVENE</b>	97
<b>ANNUAL INDEX OF ARTICLES</b>	100

# CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AS CURRICULAR PRAXIS

## REMAPPING THE PEDAGOGICAL BORDERLANDS OF MEDIA LITERACY IN U.S. MASS COMMUNICATION PROGRAMMES

SIHO NAM

### Abstract

The current stalemate of mass communication as neither a professional nor a worthwhile academic discipline in U.S. higher education is deeply rooted in the gradual evaporation of the critical in its curriculum. In light of this, this article strives to reclaim “the critical” in media literacy, aiming at three main goals. First, it attempts to problematise the escalating vocationalisation of mass communication education. Second, it seeks to build a philosophical, theoretical base for critical media literacy, informed by critical educational theories developed by Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and others. Third, it aims to identify some core areas of critical media literacy by which to reconfigure mass communication as an interdisciplinary academic field within the larger context of democracy. Ultimately, the article makes the case for repositioning critical media literacy as pedagogy of possibility that opens up a new pedagogical space for alternative, counter-hegemonic mass communication education and practices.

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## Introduction

Mass communication in the United States is marked by both growth and crisis. Mass communication and media studies as a college-level discipline<sup>1</sup> has grown exponentially over the past several decades in the U.S. For instance, the number of bachelor's degrees conferred in communication, journalism, and other related mass communication programmes increased from 10,324 to 73,955 between 1971 and 2006 (National Center for Education Statistics 2008). This trend is easily confirmed by other educational statistics and enrolment survey data, such as the University of Georgia's annual surveys of journalism and mass communication (Annual Surveys n.d.). Mass communication and media studies are usually housed in the same academic unit, so the two terms are frequently used interchangeably. This blurring of fields comes as no surprise, because mass communication institutions, technologies, and practices are inexorably linked to the mass media.

While the discipline has grown rapidly, this growth is characterised by an insidious symptom: the gradual evisceration of “the critical” in its curriculum. As McChesney (2004) rightfully observed, the enormous growth of mass communication largely stems from the swelling demand of students seeking jobs in the growing mass communication and information industries rather than from the acceptance of mass communication as a worthwhile academic discipline with its own idiosyncratic disciplinary core and theoretical and methodological sophistication. Thus, he goes on to argue, “The trivialisation and irrelevance of U.S. media studies is directly related to the marginalisation of critical perspectives” (McChesney 2004, 42). Even when critical issues are raised in the mass communication classroom, they mostly end travelling at the university gate, creating and reproducing a disconnect between critical academic discourse and public spheres outside the university. Similarly, Jensen (2009) also sees a crisis in journalism, which has historically been the most important pillar of mass communication education, due to its inability and unwillingness to tackle some of the most urgent problems of our times, such as increasing media ownership concentration, the breakdown of traditional news media, a decline in serious journalism, and environmental deterioration, to name a few. Furthermore, it is hardly convincing to advocate mass communication as a professional discipline such as nursing, clinical psychology, legal education, or medical training when only about a half of mass communication graduates find full-time or part-time jobs in the broadly defined communication field (Becker et al. 2009).

I argue that one solution for this growth in crisis is to place critical media literacy (CML) in a central position in mass communication education. I use the term “critical” media literacy purposefully to distinguish it from other conceptions of and approaches to media literacy, especially psychological and cognitive approaches.<sup>2</sup> Media have become an inevitable condition of our daily life and a torrent of graphic, sensational, and fast-paced news and entertainment content streams across different platforms (Gitlin 2003). It is no exaggeration to say that today's media function as an omnipresent pedagogical institution, shaping our values, ideologies, identities, and communities. Consequently, the need to help young people achieve media literacy has become an important public policy priority across different educational levels in many countries. Thus, a U.S. Federal Com-

munications Commission (FCC) commissioner, Michael Copps (2006, 2), claims, "in a culture where media is pervasive and invasive, kids need to think critically about what they see, hear and read. No child's education can be complete without this." In terms of media literacy education, however, the U.S. lags behind other advanced democracies such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and Sweden (Kubey 2003; Kellner and Share 2005; Mihailidis 2006).

It is within this context that I take up the issue of media literacy education in U.S. higher education. This article attempts to unearth the hidden curriculum of U.S. mass communication programmes and reconsiders CML as a guiding principle for a wider, continual curricular praxis, as opposed to curriculum as a product (Grundy 1987). Some central questions to be explored then include the following: What does it mean to incorporate critical literacy into mass communication education? What are the problems of mainstream or scientific approaches to media literacy? How can critical educational theories help reconfigure the disciplinary identity of mass communication in general and the pedagogical goal of media literacy in particular? What are the core areas of CML, as differentiated from other notions of media literacy? In exploring these questions, I shall start by pointing out some serious problems and challenges facing U.S. mass communication programmes today.

## The Stalemate of Mass Communication in U.S. Higher Education

Mass communication, with its fragile and often contested disciplinary identity, draws from an eclectic mix of theories, methods, and applications from social sciences, humanities, and even engineering. Nonetheless, mainstream American mass communication scholarship, or "the dominant paradigm," has long been characterised by its propensity for behavioural and functionalistic theories and methods (Gitlin 1978; McChesney 2000, 2004). Later the emergence of the critical and cultural studies paradigm has served as its antithesis. In other words, "the field is divided between those attempting to make the processes of communication more efficient and effective and those committed to criticising the forms and practices of the media in contemporary society" (Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 1998, xiii). Consequently, while it seems bizarre, there are strange bedfellows (e.g., journalism and advertising) in most well-established mass communication units. This often creates a palpable tension between journalism and mass communication in the service of democracy, on the one hand, and mass communication on behalf of corporate interests, on the other. An unfortunate yet escalating trend is that mass communication curricula are increasingly integrated with advertising and public relations (PR) courses. Surveys of any of the mass communication programmes (113 as of 2009) accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) show a significant presence of advertising, PR, and/or strategic communication courses in their curricula.

This increasing presence of corporate communication courses may reflect a larger trend, an increasing commercialisation of U.S. higher education institutions or the "hijacking of higher education," as Giroux (2007) bluntly termed it. The unequal distribution of cultural capital and the maintenance and reproduction of these conditions via the commercialisation of higher education have been greatly criticised by current scholarship (e.g., Blackmore 2001; Bettig and Hall 2003; Chomsky 2003;

Giroux 2007; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). In this market-driven conception of education, pedagogy is reduced to “the measurable, accountable methodology used to transmit course content,” normalising the technical and instrumental rationality at the expense of critical education (Giroux and Simon 1989, 221). As a matter of fact, there is much truth in Chomsky’s (2003) observation: “[T]he university serves as an instrument for ensuring the perpetuation of social privilege.... [I]t generally means that the universities provide a service to those existing social institutions that are in a position to articulate their needs and to subsidise the effort to meet these needs (180-181).”

Regrettably, the penetration of corporate logics and instrumental rationality is undeniably evident in mass communication education. The curriculum is teeming with such catchy or marketable course titles as Strategic Brand Management, Integrated Marketing Communication, Interactive Advertising, and Corporate Public Relations, to list just a few. The problem does not lie in the inclusion of advertising in the formal curriculum, but rather in the way it is taught. Rather than considering advertising as a cultural force that helps fashion contemporary consumer culture, advertising courses are designed to train professionals who are well-versed in industry standards in market research, copywriting, graphic design, media planning, and the like. This trend clearly marks a radical shift from mass communication in the interests of public culture and democracy to the strategic mobilisation of consumers on behalf of mercenary clients.

Much to the dismay of critical educators in mass communication, the rise of PR and advertising has accompanied the fall of serious journalism and the shrinking of the public sphere. There are certainly still a considerable number of courses dedicated to examining the democratic obligations of the media and mass communication, but the curriculum is increasingly influenced by the logics of the market. In turn, this trend creates an educational environment in which the curriculum is continually reconfigured with the aim of professional training, and in turn students’ learning is assessed from an overly narrow perspective of their mastery of employable skills. Curriculum standards can serve restrictive roles and help produce “official knowledge” (Apple 1999). Therefore, this increasing vocationalisation expedites the process of conservative social engineering in which the notion of education for democratic citizenship is effectively replaced by specialised knowledge that serves the status quo while simultaneously helping to internalise the hegemonic power maintenance on the part of the educated. Furthermore, vocationalisation fails to elevate mass communication’s status as a valuable academic discipline. Indeed, “communication is a failure in the prestige game on U.S. campuses for the simple reason that aside from Penn and Stanford, it barely exists on Ivy League and other elite private university campuses.”<sup>3</sup> At most large state universities that house large-enrolment mass communication programmes, it has become “a hepped up form of vocational education” (McChesney 2004, 54).

Those who believe that critical media education is on the verge of extinction face a real challenge when they attempt to initiate curricular reform. The current curriculum is aligned with mainstream industry in the name of professionalism, and alternative approaches are often discouraged or disparaged. Breaking this cycle is arduous and often produces animosity. The recent experience of Manjunath Pendakur, one of the most well-regarded critical media scholars in North

America, illustrates this difficulty. Pendakur was the Dean of The College of Mass Communication and Media Arts (CMCMA) at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC). He left the university in 2007 due to the outrage of some CMCMA graduates, even after his second five-year term was approved by the university. In a petition letter sent to the SIUC Board of Trustees, participating alumni asked for the resignation of Dean Pendakur for his misguided curriculum reform:

*Nowhere does [the mission statement] mention that the College seeks to train students for successful careers in their chosen profession or to assist them in finding jobs upon graduation. What purpose could a college possibly have other than the benefit of its students? What practical good is an undergraduate degree if it does not include employable skills? (Letter of Concern 2006)*

Nowhere in the more than 2,000-word letter did the alumni specifically mention his misbehaviour or incompetence as a dean; rather, the letter presented an accusation grounded in a false dichotomy between theory and practice. The CMCMA made it clear that it aimed “[t]o educate and serve society as a public institution by engaging in critical, theoretical and *practical* [italics added] scholarly/creative activity” (MCMA Vision n.d.). In the lengthy letter, the alumni rarely addressed such vital components of college education as civic participation, critical thinking, community service, or democracy at large. The allegation typifies an instrumental rationality that purports that education should be evaluated in terms of its use value, “where use is increasingly narrowly defined as economic productivity” (Ruitenbergh 2004, 347). This example is not an isolated event. As early as the late 1960s, there was a notable effort at reforming mass communication education (e.g., journalism education reform at the University of Iowa initiated by Malcolm MacLean, Jr.; see Norton Jr. 2001). The increasing infusion of corporate communication paradigms into mass communication curricula blurs the roles of public scholarship and corporate practice. As a result, in mass communication classrooms euphemisms such as strategy, effectiveness, efficiency, and measurement prevail over such important issues as citizenship, social justice, and democracy.

There is yet another layer to the problem with media literacy education and scholarship. Although there may be a common definition of media literacy, there is only a murky consensus as to its fundamental goal and how it should be achieved. Despite a wide variety of theoretical positions (from critical theory to the cognitive-psychological approach), media literacy is generally defined as “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of texts” (Christ and Potter 1998, 7). When one of the most prominent communication journals, *Journal of Communication*, dedicated an entire issue to discussing the status of media literacy, the special issue editor wondered why “we really understand so little about the subject” (Rubin 1998, 3). One answer may be that, because media literacy has been greatly influenced by the behavioural and functionalistic traditions of mass communication scholarship, it has often been narrowly understood as the cognitive or psychological aspects of media use and measured in terms of individual competency levels. Although the goal of this article is not to critique the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological problems of this approach (often called media effects research), some points must be made clear here.<sup>4</sup>

First, media effects research seldom challenges the status quo. Although its research findings may point to the effects of some detrimental media content, the

basic system of unequal power relations and the media that support them remains largely unquestioned. This politically sanitised version of media literacy leads to a dubious conclusion: “[T]he individual should be regarded as the locus of media literacy – not schools, parents, or the media industries” (Potter 2004, 266). Driven by the desire to find some lucid cause-and-effect relationships, media effects researchers often present a body of self-evidentiary, uninspiring findings such as “media literacy education (i.e., cause) helps the student to become media literate (i.e., effect)” or “individual differences in cognitive capacities lead to the different levels of media literacy.” In fact, it is not uncommon to find articles in some of the most respected journals that operationalise media literacy in terms of how well subjects cope with experimental stimuli, such as gory violence, sexual movie scenes, or stealthy promotional messages. This is not to say that the cognitive approach has no place in media literacy education, but rather to clarify its limitations in considering the larger social, political, and cultural forces that constitute much of the non-quantifiable mechanisms and forces of the media. While it might be possible to dissect media literacy into a set of measurable or manipulatable variables, media power often overrides individual cognitive differences. The microscopic obsession with statistical rigor, methodological refinement, and technical craftsmanship tend to discourage the formation of collective, critical pedagogy of media literacy within the larger context of a more democratic media system.

The narrowly conceived, scientific notion of media literacy adds fuel to the attenuation of critical media education. The problem does not necessarily lie in the adherence to scientific neutrality, but rather in a misconception of science that emphasises rigorous, objective methodology over the need to take a position and to ask socially meaningful research questions at the outset of inquiry. Chomsky (2000, 35) asserts, “Science survives by constant challenge to established thinking. Successful education in the sciences seeks to encourage students to initiate such challenges and to pursue them.” However, such a task is not easily carried out in the vocationalised educational environment where students have to “work within hierarchical institutions and confront reward structures that privilege individual distinction over collective social change” (Lipsitz 2000, 80).

Moreover, the cognitive, psycho-reductionist approach tends to restrain media users as helpless receptacles of media messages rather than helping them become active agents of cultural politics. Thus, responsibility is now placed on individuals, while media mega-corporations are relieved of public accountability and social responsibility and allowed to continue running their businesses as usual. Essentially, the dominant education in mass communication is politically pessimistic; it restricts students to the norms of the status quo and is consequently cynical toward the possibility of change.

The indifference to media literacy may also be attributed to the naive active audience theory, which posits that mass media industries are sensitive and responsive to audiences’ needs, offering what audiences want to read and watch (Meehan 2005). This position offers no critical insight into the complex, interconnected relations between media, society, and culture. Nor is it possible to find a meaningful link between media literacy education and the larger goal of realising a more democratic society. Media literacy ought to help mass communication attain legitimate intellectual recognition. Media literacy should help restore the notion



of democratic citizenship education in mass communication. Media literacy must serve as a *raison d'être* for wide curricular reform that can unify both theoretical courses (e.g., Media and Public Opinion, Political Economy of the Media, or International Communications, to name a few) and skills-oriented practical courses (e.g., journalistic writing courses and multimedia production courses) to serve the interests of democracy and civic participation.

The cognitive, media effects-based version of media literacy that is largely convergent with the scientific, behaviourist tradition of mass communication scholarship has apparent limitations in achieving these goals. Without "critical" literacy at its heart, media literacy education runs the risk of being reduced to a set of technical skills that can be implanted by the teacher into the student's mind in the traditional classroom. While a media effects-based conception of media literacy could offer some "self-defence skills" (Karlberg 2007), the inclusion of media literacy as a credit-earning, standalone course may simply serve as a token. Essentially, knee-jerk, *ad hoc* responses to the call for critical media education on behalf of democratic citizenship are insufficient and unwarranted. Although including a media literacy course in the formal curriculum would be a step forward, students need daily exercise (comprehensive critical media literacy), rather than a single dose of a painkiller.

## Critical Educational Theories and Media Literacy Education

Having examined both the vocationalisation and scientification of mass communication, the following questions are now at stake. Can we open a space for critical pedagogy when the mass communication curriculum increasingly falls victim to market forces? Is it still possible for mass communication education to be critical? If so, how can we envision CML as an alternative, counter-hegemonic curricular praxis? In helping us contemplate the pedagogical borderlands of CML, critical educational theory has much to offer regarding these urgent yet insufficiently recognised issues.

Some may argue that critical pedagogy is inadequate for media literacy because of its overly theoretical or ideological nature. This accusation is rooted in a misconception of theory and a misguided belief in neutrality. As McLaren (1994) sharply points out, "any worthwhile theory of schooling must be *partisan*. That is, it must be fundamentally tied to a struggle for a qualitatively better life for all through the construction of a society based on nonexploitative relations and social justice" (McLare 1994, 176-177). Seen from this perspective, media literacy education is never apolitical, meaning media literacy should actively pose the questions of ideology, politics, and power struggles that are inherently embedded in the production, distribution, and consumption of media and popular culture. In his foreword to the 30th anniversary edition of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, Richard Shall acutely captures the political nature of education:

*There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which*

*men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (as in Freire 2000, 34).*

If education is never a neutral venture but one that either brings the conformity of the status quo and its logic, or one that provides the linguistic, theoretical, and communicative resources necessary for students to transform their world, then it is imperative for mass communication educators to consider their role in providing either an education that helps ensure the continuous, seamless operation of the dominant media institutions or a pedagogy of freedom that enables both theory and praxis for alternative and democratic media education and practices.

It would be almost impossible to present any meaningful notion of critical pedagogy without discussing Paulo Freire's contribution to critical literacy as liberatory practice. Although he initially developed his critical pedagogical theory within the particular situation of educating adults in Brazil's underdeveloped regions, his lucid articulation of liberatory, transformative pedagogy transcends both geographical and temporal borders. Above all, Freire's main concern was the elimination of oppression and the recovery of hope and possibility through education. Rebutting the traditional notion of education, which he dubbed the "banking system of education" (Freire 1998b), he was able to establish a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent critical educational theories. As Freire argues, in the banking conception of education, knowledge is seldom presented in a way that encourages students to think against the grain. All that is required of the teacher is to implant knowledge into the unsuspecting student's mind. Not only is this a threat to students' freedom to construct their own knowledge, but it is also a serious threat to the possibility of materialising a democratic, transformative pedagogical space in the classroom.

One of the most salient premises of Freire's theory lies in its understanding of human beings as critical agents of history, insofar as they are conditioned – but not determined – by historical specificities while simultaneously being free to dream of the future as a possibility (Freire 1998a). In fact, a large part of his work is dedicated to promoting education as a means of expanding the possibility of social change: "[H]istory is possibility and not determinism ... It is impossible to understand as possibility if we do not recognise human beings as beings who make free decisions" (Freire 1998b, 37). Using Freire's liberatory pedagogy, we can postulate media literacy as a transformative pedagogical practice. This conceptualisation helps mass communication educators envision alternative mass communication education and media praxis to help students become critical media users as well as capable media producers.

Freire's emphasis on critical thinking also informs the theorisation of CML. In his view, critical thinking is not simply limited to a set of analytic skills, nor is it "encyclopedic knowledge, and men as mere receptacles to be stuffed full of empirical data and a mass of unconnected raw facts, which have to be filed in the brain" (Gramsci 1981, 193). Freire was specifically concerned with teaching critical thinking that questions the status quo, fosters critical capacity in citizens, and enables them to resist various social dominations. Thus, his critical pedagogy requires taking a position on behalf of those who are disenfranchised from social, economic, and political possibilities. In a similar vein, Winch (2004) also advocates the development of critical rationality and agency, or the process of conscientisation, as the

core of any meaningful notion of critical education. Thus, it is not the teacher who implants media literacy “skills” into the student’s mind, but rather the student who initiates their own exploration of media territories by crossing various intellectual and disciplinary borders.

While ideological apparatuses (including the media) in a capitalist society induce individuals to conform to the established structure of dominance, it is also true that critical pedagogy can provide resources with which to organise and empower individuals against the existing hegemony. Exploring this pedagogical terrain would be one of the most fulfilling tasks for critical educators. Therefore, if we are to embrace Freirean critical pedagogy, it is imperative to dream of a more democratic educational system and to envision the possibility of liberatory media education that stands out of the corporate-endorsed vocational curriculum. Although Freire did not directly mention the notion of media literacy in his work, he gives a hint of what it means to practice critical media pedagogy in his later work (2004), where he talked about television literacy as a way to unearth the ideological functioning of the media:

*In reality, all communication is the communication of something, carried out in a certain manner, in favor or defense, subtly or explicitly so, of something or someone and against something or someone that is not always referred to. Thus, there is also the expert role that ideology plays in communication, hiding truths, but also ensuring the ideological nature of the very communicative process (Freire 2004, 94).*

Hence, being critical involves challenging taken-for-granted notions of mass communication such as objectivity, fairness, balance, diversity, and the like. In other words, CML would mean actively questioning how these concepts are used, misused, and abused in what particular contexts and for whose interests. For example, instead of uncritically accepting objectivity as an unbreachable journalistic tenet, CML would invite students to scrutinise how it functions as a restrictive force that helps shield lethargic, sycophantic journalism. This kind of CML certainly requires comprehensive knowledge of the media at both institutional and symbolic levels and critical interrogation into the interplay between the two. In this regard, Henry Giroux’s theorisation of the cultural politics of media and popular culture has much to say.

Freire and Giroux share the central tenet that the role of education is to help students to be free and to be the agents of history. With that philosophical foundation, Giroux has been concerned with expanding the possibility of agency. That is, he seeks to find a theoretical language by which to talk about non-deterministic, critical yet context-specific educational policy, theory, and praxis that can help overcome fatalistic cynicism to realise substantial social change.

Critical media studies scholars, especially those who inherited the Frankfurt School of thought and economic-reductionist structuralism, tend to dismiss media and popular culture for their role in exclusively serving the ruling class’s interests. For instance, Louis Althusser (1971) saw the media as one of the most effective Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) for reproducing capitalist dominance. This kind of structuralism may offer a legitimate analytical lens by which to uncover the functions of superstructural apparatuses such as church, education, and the media in reproducing false ideologies and maintaining unequal social relations.

However, such reductionist logic is limited, as it fails to consider the possibility of oppositional ideology formation and practices. If the dominant ideology is always the ideology of the ruling class and that ideology is overpowering and all-encompassing, is it at all possible to reject that dominant ideology? If not, where is the possibility of social change? Regarding this theoretical impasse, Giroux offers a convincing response: Schools are “to be viewed as social sites marked by the interplay of domination, accommodation, and struggle” rather than “sites that function smoothly to reproduce a docile labor force” (2001a, 82).

Thus, instead of simply dismissing media and popular culture as trivial or insubstantial, critical educators need to take these up as pedagogical resources to help students unearth the hidden politics of the media in relation to social problems. In developing his notion of critical public pedagogy or critical cultural studies at large, Giroux (2000) discusses Stuart Hall’s notion of “articulation,” which allows for the possibility of “oppositional reading” as opposed to “hegemonic or preferred reading.” Central to his understanding of Hall’s theory of articulation is the idea that critical pedagogy requires deep awareness about both the material conditions of cultural texts and the possibility of oppositional discourses within the dominant ideology. The media and culture are thus sites of struggle, identity formation, and power relations. Giroux’s theoretical appropriation of articulation is significant because it opens the possibility of challenging various forms of dominance at both institutional (i.e., political economy of the media) and symbolic (e.g., cultural studies, textual analysis, audience reception analysis) levels. Considering that today’s ideological topography is not monolithic, it is imperative to understand critical pedagogy with a sense of agency:

*Many current trends in critical pedagogy are embedded in the endemic weaknesses of a theoretical project overly concerned with developing a language of critique.... Unfortunately, this one-sided emphasis on critique is matched by the lack of theoretical and pragmatic discourse upon which to ground its own vision of society and schooling and to shape the direction of a critical praxis (Giroux and McLaren 1991, 156).*

Not only does Giroux’s theory understand pedagogy as a mode of cultural criticism, but it also provides a critical-pragmatic tool by which to make the pedagogical political. In this endeavour, Giroux makes it clear that critical pedagogy ought to transcend the policed boundaries of traditional disciplines. Giroux (2004) rightly reshifts the microscopic, purely textual focus of cultural studies to the notion of critical public pedagogy for democratic citizenship by asserting that cultural studies should support a pedagogy of possibility, one that actively seeks to transform the victims of domination into the agents of democratic resistance and struggle. His lucid articulation of critical cultural studies reveals the media as constructed and contested cultural space that can be used for the theorisation of CML. According to Giroux and Simon (1989), critical pedagogy needs to be “a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations” (222). Giroux’s particular emphasis on the media as pedagogical resource is worth quoting here:

*If critical educators are to make a case for the context-specific nature of teaching – a teaching that not only negotiates difference but takes seriously the*

*imperative to make knowledge meaningful so that it might become critical and transformative – they must expand curricula to include those elements of popular culture [and media] that play a powerful role in shaping the desires, needs, and identities of students (Giroux 2001a, 133).*

Giroux's contribution is significant because his theory helps us to not only break the vicious cycle of cynicism propagated by neoliberal education, but also come to grips with the notion of agency. Critical pedagogy has long been criticised for its inability to furnish concrete pedagogical tools and methods that can actually be implemented in the classroom. For Giroux, such an accusation is a *non sequitur* because his critical pedagogy vividly demonstrates what it means to connect critical theory to pedagogical praxis. Indeed, empirical analyses (in the broad, critical sense) of various popular cultural and media texts inform much of his intellectual work. For example, Giroux (2001b) used a popular film, *Fight Club*, as a pedagogical text by which to tackle some of the most pressing issues of contemporary capitalist society, including consumerism, corporate social control, masculinity, violence, and resistance. This sort of pedagogical practice not only opens a space for students' own critical inquiry into the mediated cultural text, but it also invites them to think about what it means to be oppositional and anti-hegemonic via CML. Giroux's works always help to make the pedagogical political, the political practical, and the practical pedagogical, dealing with such diverse issues as the politics of youth and innocence (1999, 2000), terrorism and the media (2006a), natural disaster and the politics of disability (2006b), and the neoliberal transformation of the university (2007).

As Giroux argues, when the texts of everyday media culture are incorporated into the project of critical pedagogy, they create the possibility of combining textual, historical, political, and ideological analyses in ways that help teachers and students move beyond the limits of protectionism and traditional disciplinary boundaries. Therefore, Giroux's theory of culture, when reinvented for a theory of CML, enables us to see not only the hegemonic struggle embedded in mass communication education but also a discursive space wherein the possibility of change transpires.

## Remapping the Pedagogical Borderlands of Critical Media Literacy

Based on the understanding of critical pedagogical theory's contribution to CML, my aim in this section is to identify some core issues and areas of CML. It may be useful here to recapitulate what is meant by CML. It can be understood as the ability to read, analyse, evaluate, critique, and create various media texts within multiple social, historical, economic, ideological, and cultural contexts. A point of departure from other conventional, cognitive approaches to media literacy is how well students understand the media's various positions, operations, and functions within multifaceted contexts, and whether they are willing and able to produce media that advance democratic principles and social justice. This definition of CML resembles Kellner and Share's (2005, 372) definition: "Critical media literacy not only teaches students to learn from media, to resist media manipulation, and to use media materials in constructive ways, but is also concerned with developing skills

that will help create good citizens and that will make individuals more motivated and competent participants in social life.”

First, CML needs to be comprehensive and contextual. A comprehensive CML will require actively crossing the narrowly conceived disciplinary boundary of mass communication. For example, rather than simply considering media to be almighty, independent variables that operate independent of other socio-political forces, CML needs to consider the media within larger socio-political contexts. Most mainstream media theories treat the media as an influence on other vulnerable variables – for example, media determining the formation of public opinion by setting a certain agenda (agenda-setting theory), media presenting a certain frame by which to interpret a news event in a certain way (framing theory), or reality police shows shaping the viewer’s worldview in line with the violent TV world (cultivation theory). In contrast, CML must question outright the myth of the so-called free, autonomous media – media operating freely and existing outside the domains of social conflicts, inequality, and ideology. This would involve, for instance, unearthing how public opinion is manufactured not only by the media but also by more potent yet invisible gatekeepers, rather than naively assuming it is something that emerges free of such external forces. Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney (1998) capture the need for comprehensive and contextual media literacy by noting: “[T]he media can only be understood in relation to their context, a context that is simultaneously institutional, economic, social, cultural, and historical” (xvi). Only then are students able to examine “how media and communication systems and content reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class and social relations” (McChesney 2004, 43). Lewis and Jhally (1998) also espouse a contextual approach, asserting that “a textual analysis that takes place without examining the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions in which texts are produced and understood is necessarily limited” (110).

Second, CML needs to move beyond simple protectionism to make media literacy education more political. Ironically, many media literacy projects tend to victimise youth and their cultural experiences. Especially for conservative protectionist groups, the primary goal of media literacy education is to keep students from being exposed to immoral and dangerous media content. This politically sanitised, rather than politically sensitized, version of media literacy is insufficient or even counter-progressive; it dodges the issue of how the unequal appropriation of material and symbolic resources is ensured and normalised. Protectionist solutions may include preventing children from listening to the songs of Eminem, 50 Cent, and the like because of their misogynic, violent lyrics, or calling for direct regulatory interventions into media content while failing to critically analyse the hidden mechanisms by which such cultural artefacts are produced, distributed, and promoted. Thus, the real players of the music industry – MTV, radio conglomerates, mega record labels, and even retailers like Walmart – remain unquestioned and unchallenged. Therefore, the protectionist version of media literacy runs the risk of reducing media literacy to the chore of weeding out bad apples, ultimately serving to neutralise the political project of media literacy. In contrast, CML views media literacy as a form of cultural politics that helps students to deconstruct and reconstruct the political and cultural meanings of media as well as to participate in collective social action, democracy, symbolic imagination, and struggle. With the

increasing vocationalisation of the mass communication classroom, it is imperative to politicise media literacy to help students criticise the values propagated by corporate power. Although educators are desperate for media literacy resources, it is vitally important to take a critical stance in recruiting industry sponsorship because corporate sponsors may want to soften media literacy “to make sure that public criticism of the media never gets too loud, abrasive, or strident” (Hobbs 1998, 26).

Third, CML opposes a false dichotomy between theory and praxis. As discussed previously, the misconception of media literacy as faulty scientism has expedited the evaporation of the critical in media literacy education. In turn, this legitimises artificial divides between the theoretical and the practical, between the scientific and the interpretive, and between the critical and the professional. Critical education for democratic citizenship does not necessarily negate education that may be useful for one’s profession. As Lewis (1998) explains, a distinction can be made between “education for jobs” and “education about work.” CML can be integrated into mass communication curricula in light of the latter. Among the U.S. mass communication curricular, multiple levels of disconnects exist between theory courses, practical courses, PR courses, journalism courses, and the like. In bridging the multilayered gaps, CML can serve as a guiding philosophical principle to remedy the seriously compartmentalised mass communication curricular. This wider curricular reform praxis in light of CML must be accompanied by the abandonment of the notion (or myth) of disciplinary purity, because it runs the risk of creating borders that keep students from actively and broadly exploring their own position in the media and cultural environment. As a reformer’s guiding principle, CML not only remains at the normative level, but it can also be meaningfully infused with other specific, skills-oriented courses such as journalistic writing and media production courses. Skills courses can be reconfigured to advance social justice and democracy and to bring about positive social change on the university campus and beyond. Further, mass communication curriculum reform via CML does not call for jettisoning the so-called strategic communication (i.e., advertising and PR) courses. Rather, those courses can be restructured to advance a public agenda and socially responsible messages. This process requires re-theorising those sub-fields in light of CML. For example, a meaningful effort was recently undertaken to reclaim “the public” in the world of public relations (Nayden 2009).

Fourth, critical educators need to actively incorporate media production into CML education. However, this does not necessarily mean training students to be well-versed in production skills according to the mainstream industry’s standards and expectations. Rather, it encourages students to initiate and organise their own alternative and oppositional media culture and practices – what Hobbs (1998) termed “expressive” media production, as opposed to “vocational” production (20). Likewise, Lewis and Jhally (1998) caution against the same misguided approach to media production: “[T]eaching production as purely a set of technical skills leads to an analytical immersion rather than a critical stance.” To make media production critical and political, they argue, “production [should] be integrated into an overall theoretical approach that highlights the question of power” (117-118). In fact, Sut Jhally’s Media Education Foundation (MEF) itself epitomises what alternative media production can do for mass communication and media education on behalf

of democratic citizenship education.<sup>5</sup> Media production grounded in CML should include the self-reflective process of relating critical theories to the production of media content that is free from both bureaucratic and commercial interests. It should also include the process of questioning the logic and aesthetics of mainstream media production within the larger context of public culture. For example, students may critically examine the limitations placed on them as independent media producers of controlled access to corporate-owned, copyright-protected media materials that may be essential for their video documentaries.

Fifth, CML needs to take visual images seriously. The importance of visual literacy does not solely reside in humanistic or aesthetic dimensions, but also in a political dimension. Instead of dismissing visual images as trivial, critical educators must recognise visual images as an integral part of students' daily media culture. CML demands that students learn "how to read critically the new technological and visual cultures that exercise a powerful influence over their lives as well as their conception of what it means to be a social subject engaged in acts of responsible citizenship" (Giroux 2001a, 133). Nevertheless, a common misconception about the use of visual media (including TV shows, movies, commercials, music videos, and videogames) is that the younger generation is highly competent compared to their older counterparts. While this observation may be true, visual images are often so taken for granted that there is little serious discussion about their relevance to critical pedagogy. Instead, CML strives to help students develop critical abilities to decode the social, cultural, and political meanings attached to and embedded in visual images and to ultimately produce with their own creative and oppositional readings. Ultimately, CML of visual images "involves learning how to appreciate, decode, and interpret images concerning both how they are constructed and operate in our lives and what they communicate in concrete situations" (Best and Kellner 1998, 85-86).

Finally, CML needs to be updated and expanded in light of new media and globalisation. Recent intellectual developments (Kellner 2000; Livingstone 2004; Nam 2009) point to the need for media literacy to be responsive to the changing conditions of literacy. Kellner's (2000) theorisation of multicultural and multiple literacies is particularly helpful in this regard. Departing from a romanticised or depoliticised eulogy of the so-called information revolution, his notion of multiple literacies helps CML take up new media and the Internet in the context of realising radical pluralist democracy in the age of neoliberal globalisation. Without losing sight of the socio-historical specifics of the production, distribution, and consumption of information as a commodity, CML requires students to create as well as consume information in the networked cultural-political environment, if the Internet is to become a democratising force. Thus, Kellner (2000) argues, "transformation in pedagogy must be as radical as the technological transformations that are taking place. Critical pedagogy must thus rethink the concepts of literacy and the very nature of education in a high-tech and rapidly evolving society" (196). For example, the recent growth of various social justice, democratic, and anti-globalisation movements via social media on the Internet (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) affords a striking illustration of the Internet's possibility for creating a new site for public pedagogy. Further, CML can help link the emergence of free, collective labour online (e.g., Wikipedia) to important topics in mass communication and media studies, such as



free speech, net neutrality, Internet regulation, and copyrighting of public culture. A word of caution must be noted here. The so-called information revolution and media convergence have come with an increased audience control over media content and the extreme personalisation of daily media consumption (Sunstein 2001). This personalisation is often uncritically seen as signalling the complete reversal of the power relation between the media and the consumer. While it is true that new social media and the Internet can help increase audience autonomy, it is equally important to think critically about the limits and limitations of such new media in terms of how they impede, rather than promote, democracy and how they are appropriated by corporations. Moreover, CML should be enriched in light of globalisation. For instance, Nam (2009) proposed that critical global media literacy be comprised four distinct yet interrelated levels of analysis: political economy of the global media; international flow of news and culture; media coverage of global events; and the institutionalisation of global media policy and regulation. This conceptual framework may prove useful for mass communication courses in international communication, comparative media systems, global media diplomacy, etc.

## Concluding Remarks

This article was an exploratory attempt to reconfigure CML to serve as larger curricular praxis for U.S. mass communication programmes in higher education. As argued, the critical analysis of media literacy has been gradually attenuated and the mass communication curriculum compartmentalised. Although many academic mass communication departments have incorporated media literacy as part of their formal curriculum, it has been often treated as a set of narrowly defined measurable cognitive skills. Regarding this evisceration of the critical, this article made the case that CML needs to be reconsidered as a rationale for curricular reform, one that aims to redraw the pedagogical borderlands of media literacy and of mass communication education at large. It argues that CML ought to strive to help students initiate their own open, critical inquiry into the conditions of media production, representation, and reproduction. To reiterate, CML should be grounded in the critical interrogation of the unequal distribution of both economic and cultural capitals, the unjust media representation of race and gender, and, most importantly, the vision of more just, substantive democracy. This process will require refocusing the pedagogical aim of mass communication from training students to be competent yet docile cultural workers to helping them to become transformative social agents who cross disciplinary boundaries and engage in the project of realising democracy in their various capacities – as journalists, media producers, and creative cultural workers. Only then will we be able to get out of the stalemate of mass communication and media studies education.

To reclaim the critical in media literacy is to reform the mass communication curriculum. CML should serve to expand transdisciplinary pedagogical space, for example, by initiating a meaningful intellectual dialogue between cultural studies, political economy, education, arts, race and feminist studies, and the like. Furthermore, CML as curricular praxis must offer broader general education media courses at the institutional level. CML should accompany a larger, wide-reaching intellectual movement that challenges the philosophies, policies, and curricula

that make up the neoliberal university. Although it is true that the article was largely based on the critique of the U.S.-based mass communication programmes, its philosophical and theoretical frameworks well apply to ever-commercialising universities across the globe.

To conclude, the disconnect between critical pedagogy and media literacy can be remedied by reconfiguring CML as curricular praxis that goes beyond the often restrictive, market-driven disciplinary boundaries. The charge that CML remains purely theoretical can be overcome by taking daily media and popular culture seriously as legitimate pedagogical resources. Ultimately, CML promotes a collective effort to reform mass communication and media studies curriculum in the service of democracy. Thus, it is positioned as the pedagogical project of reformers rather than of conformists.

### Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to the late Djung Yune Tchoi (1971-2005) for her love, intellectual inspiration, and untiring commitment to social justice. In addition, the author is very thankful of the helpful comments and suggestions from anonymous reviewers.

### Notes:

1. Probably no other discipline or academic field has been as diversely labeled as communication. Some common names and/or sub-fields of it include communication(s), communication arts and science, speech communication, communication studies, mass communication(s), mass media, media studies, information studies, etc. A general trend is that mass communication is used as an umbrella term to cover its many sub-fields such as journalism, advertising, public relations, and telecommunications/electronic media. Three of the discipline's most prestigious scholarly/professional organizations – the International Communication Association (ICA), National Communication Association (NCA), and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), have different approaches to the communication discipline, and this intellectual chasm is well illustrated in their different division compositions and names. In this article, I use the terms mass communication and media studies in order to denote the academic study of mass communication institutions, processes, regulation, and policy as well as their influences and effects on society. In general, this article uses the two terms interchangeably in the context of U.S. higher education. Communication rooted in humanistic and rhetorical traditions is not included in this discussion and critique. For a detailed historical account of journalism and mass communication education in the United States, see Dickson (2000).
2. For a wide variety of theoretical approaches and issues related to media literacy, see *American Behavioral Scientist*, volume 48, special issues 1 & 2 (2004) and Hobbs's (1998) "The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement" in *Journal of Communication*.
3. This hierarchy is also unmistakably seen at the graduate level. Most, if not all, highly regarded U.S. mass communication programmes are housed in large state universities, although there are a few notable exceptions. According to the 2004 reputational study of U.S. mass communication doctoral programmes by NCA, the top ten include Pennsylvania, Stanford, Michigan State, Southern California, Wisconsin, Texas, Alabama, Penn State, Illinois, and Ohio State.
4. This point is well articulated in David Gautlett's "Ten Things Wrong with the 'Effects' Model," although I do not agree entirely with all of his arguments. Refer to Gautlett (1998).
5. Established in 1992, The MEF ([www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)) has produced and distributed numerous "documentary films and other educational resources to inspire critical reflection on the social, political, and cultural impact of American mass media." Its highly acclaimed, award-winning educational films have been widely used across different disciplines in high school and college classrooms.

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# TALKING POLITICS ONLINE WITHIN SPACES OF POPULAR CULTURE:

## THE CASE OF THE BIG BROTHER FORUM

TODD GRAHAM

### Abstract

Talking politics online is not bound to spaces dedicated to politics, particularly the everyday political talk crucial to the public sphere. The aim of this article is to move beyond such spaces by examining political talk within a space dedicated to popular culture. The purpose is to see whether a reality TV discussion forum provides both the communicative space, content, and style for politics that both extends the public sphere while moving beyond a conventional notion. The central question is whether it fulfils the requirements of rationality and deliberation. The analysis also moves beyond a formal notion by investigating how expressive speech acts interact and influence the more traditional elements of deliberation. The findings indicate that nearly a quarter of the postings from the Big Brother sample were engaged in political talk, which was often deliberative in nature. It was a communicative space where the use of expressives both facilitated and impeded such talk.

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, the potential of the internet in fostering a public sphere where free and open deliberation and the exchange of information among citizens can prosper has been the topic of much debate (see Witschge 2004).<sup>1</sup> During this time, we have seen the rise of social media as citizens increasingly engage in e.g. debates in online forums and communities, and storytelling and reporting via blogging and twittering. What this means for the public sphere supposedly is an opening up of the conversations society has with itself, creating new avenues that foster the basic element of the public sphere, i.e. everyday political talk.

In its wake, we have seen an increase in research that looks to investigate political talk in online communicative spaces in light of the public sphere. Net-based public sphere researchers have studied these spaces in variety ways. However, the research has focused mostly on *political* spaces attached to a conventional notion of politics. Such exclusivity is problematic because political talk is not bound to these spaces nor is it to party politics, particularly the everyday political talk crucial to the public sphere. As initial research suggests, other genres of the online communicative landscape such as those tied to reality TV and popular forms of entertainment foster political talk (Graham and Harju forthcoming; Van Zoonen 2007). Political discussions that take place within these spaces also contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere. Moreover, politics today has become more pervasive. People increasingly organise their political and social meanings around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them as opposed to traditional structures and institutions (Bennett 1998; Giddens 1991). Consequently, any concept of political talk must be capable of capturing issues that may fall outside a traditional notion of politics.

The aim of this article is to move beyond politically oriented spaces by examining political talk within a reality TV forum. The purpose is to examine its democratic quality in light of a set of normative conditions of the public sphere. The analysis moved beyond a formal notion of deliberation by also examining the use of expressives. Thus, I present the following two research questions: To what extent does a reality TV forum satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere, and what role do expressives play within political talk that emerges in these spaces and in relation to the normative conditions? The answers to these questions look to provide an authentic account of how people talk politics online and provide insight into how such talk occurs outside conventional political communicative spaces.

### Political Talk and the Public Sphere

Net-based public sphere researchers have drawn heavily from deliberative democratic theory. Deliberative democracy involves public deliberation not only as a means of producing public reasoning oriented towards the common good and collective decision-making within formal and semi-formal settings, but also as a process of producing public reasoning and achieving mutual understanding within the more informal communicative spaces of the public sphere (Fearson 1998; Mansbridge 1999; Dryzek 2000). It is through ongoing participation in everyday talk whereby citizens achieve mutual understanding about themselves and each other representing the practical communicative form of what Habermas (1984, 327)



calls communicative action. This web of informal conversations over time prepares citizens and the political system at large for political action.

Net-based public sphere researches have been increasingly tapping into political talk online. Evaluating its democratic value requires normative criteria of the process of deliberation of the public sphere. Researchers have typically drawn from some aspect of Habermas's notion of the public sphere. As Dahlberg (2004) argues, Habermas's work has been both influential and valuable because it provides the most developed critical theory of the public sphere available. Specifically, it is through his pragmatic analysis of everyday conversation where he argues that when participants take up communicative rationality, they refer to several idealising presuppositions. Drawing from these (1984, 1987, 2001), six normative conditions are distinguished, which focus on providing the necessary conditions for achieving understanding during the course of political talk by placing both structural and dispositional requirements on the communicative form, process, and participant.<sup>2</sup>

First, the process in part must take the form of *rational-critical debate*. It requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which are critically reflected upon. Such an exchange requires *coherence* and *continuity*; participants should stick to the topic of discussion until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to withdrawing. The process demands three dispositional requirements, three levels of achieving mutual understanding. *Reciprocity*, representing the first, requires that participants listen and respond to each other's questions and arguments. However, reciprocity alone does not satisfy the process; *reflexivity* is required. Reflexivity is the internal process of reflecting another participant's position against one's own. With *empathy*, one takes a step further and tries to put oneself in the another person's position. It requires an empathic perspective taking in which we not only seek to understand intellectually the position of the other, but we also seek to conceptualise empathically both cognitively and affectively how others would be affected by the issues under discussion.<sup>3</sup>

## Expressives and Deliberation

Some democratic theorists maintain that rational discourse needs to be broadened, allowing for communicative forms such as greeting, gossip, rhetoric, and storytelling (Young 1996; Dryzek 2000). Young (1996, 129) argues that such forms "supplement argument by providing ways of speaking across differences in the absence of significant shared understanding." Others have argued that emotions and humour are essential to any notion of good deliberation (Basu 1999; Rosenberg 2004). Rosenberg (2004) maintains that productive deliberation requires the formation of emotional bonds between participants. Such connections fuel a participant's effort to understand other positions and arguments. Basu (1999) argues that humour warrants inclusion in any robust conception of deliberation. Humour benefits political talk in three ways: it acts as a social lubricant; it creates a more civil and productive discursive environment; and it can act as social glue (1999, 390-394). In short, deliberative democratic theorists have begun incorporating emotions and alternative communicative forms within deliberation.

However, net-based public researchers have tended to neglect expressives by typically operationalising a formal notion.<sup>4</sup> This is problematic because when

people talk politics, they not only draw from their cognitive and rational capacities, but they also draw on their emotions. Indeed, expressives are inherent to political talk, and as some of the authors above have argued, they may play an important role in enhancing it. Thus, in the analysis that follows, the use of expressives is investigated. By expressives, I am referring to humour, emotional comments, and acknowledgements. Humour represents complex emotional speech acts that excite and amuse for instance jokes and wisecracks. Emotional comments are speech acts that express one's feelings or attitude, while acknowledgements represent speech acts that acknowledge the presence, departure, or conversational action of another person, such as greeting, thanking, and complementing.

## Methods

The forum selected came from *bbfans.com*, which is a website ran by and dedicated to fans of Big Brother UK. The site maintains thousands of participants, which have contributed hundreds of thousands of postings. The data collected came from the sub-forum *Celebrity Big Brother*.<sup>5</sup> Channel 4's (UK) *Celebrity Big Brother* series features a number of celebrities living in the Big Brother house, who try to avoid eviction by the public with the aim of winning a cash prize to be donated to their nominated charity. The 2006 series, which the data reflects, consisted of 11 housemates initially, for example: Michael Barrymore the comedian, Traci Bingham the model/actress, Dennis Rodman the basketball star, and Pete Burns the singer/songwriter. What makes the 2006 series interesting is that one of the housemates was, at the time, the British MP George Galloway. Thus, it was selected because it offered a unique communicative space i.e. a nonpolitically oriented forum influenced by a political personality.

The data gathered consisted of the individual postings and the threads in which they were situated. The selection of the data was based on the broadcasting dates of the series, which represented the month of January 2006. The initial sample contained 345 threads consisting of 6803 postings. This sample was first coded for *political* talk. The goal was to allow also for a more individualised, lifestyle-based approach to politics. All those threads that contained a posting where (i) a participant made a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue, or topic in general to society, which (ii) stimulated reflection and a response by at least one other participant, were coded as political threads (Graham 2008, 22-23). The criteria will now be applied to postings from the forum:<sup>6</sup>

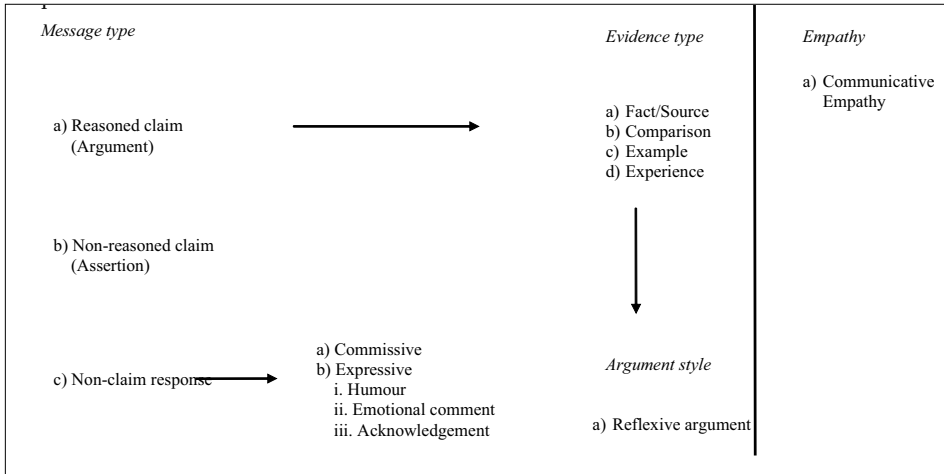
William: Funny you should say that, I have seen him checking him out... but Pete confuses me, he was married for 16 years yet now has a boy friend yet says hes not gay... my head just explodes..why didnt they teach us this in school i just cant keep up

Anne: To quote Barrymore – you should get out more. People are multisexual and not everyone fits into a convenient box.

This thread begins with a discussion on the lifestyle choices of housemates Dennis Rodman and Pete Burns. In the first posting, William states his confusion over Burn's sexuality and ends his post by making a connection to society. A political discussion on multi-sexuality emerges when Anne reflects upon William's posting and replies accordingly.

Once identified, political threads were then subjected to three phases of coding (see Figure 1). The coding scheme and instruments adopted for analysis are based on the methodological approach developed in Graham (2008). During the first phase, postings were coded for message type: reasoned claims, non-reasoned claims, and non-claim responses. Those messages that provided reasoning for their claims were coded as *reasoned claims* (arguments), while those that did not were coded as *non-reasoned claims* (assertions). Regarding non-claim responses, postings were coded for commissives and expressives. Those messages that assented, conceded (partial assent), or agreed-to-disagree with/to another participant's claim or argument from an opposing position were coded as a *commissive*. Messages were coded as an expressive response if they conveyed a participant's feeling or attitude towards him-/herself, another participant, or state of affairs, which consisted of the categories *humour*, *emotional comments*, and *acknowledgements* (as defined above). The unit of analysis during this phase was the individual message. Note that these categories were not mutually exclusive.

Figure 1: Coding Scheme Overview



Once all messages were coded, phase two of the scheme began; messages that provided reasoned claims were advanced. During this phase, the coding categories were divided into two groups: evidence type and argument style. Messages were first coded for the type of evidence used (*fact/source*, *comparison*, *experience*, and *example*), after which, selected messages were coded again for a *reflexive argument* (defined below). The unit of analysis during this phase was the argument.

During the final phase of analysis, all messages were coded for communicative empathy. Messages suggesting that the author had imagined his- or herself in another participant's position, either cognitively or emotionally, were coded as an *empathetic exchange*. The unit of analysis here was the individual message. In all three phases, the context unit of analysis was the discussion thread; the relationship between messages within a single thread were analysed. I refer the reader to Graham (2008, 23-32) for a more comprehensive and detailed account of the coding categories, the coding scheme, and an operationalisation of the six conditions.

Regarding expressives, the aim was not only to identify them, but also to see how they were used and whether they tended to *facilitate* or *impede* deliberation. Consequently, the above analysis represented only the first step. Additionally, several separate in-depth readings on the use of expressives for each were carried out with specific attention being paid to indentifying the type, analysing their social structure, and examining their use in relation to the normative conditions. In each case, the selected material was read, re-read, and worked through. Additional literature aided in the analysis; Shibles (1997) taxonomy of humour and Shaver's et al. (2001) categorisation of primary and secondary emotions were consulted as a means of categorisation. For a systematic account and breakdown of these analyses, see Graham (2009, 61-63).

## Identifying Political Talk

Political talk was no stranger to the Big Brother forum. Thirty-eight threads containing 1479 postings, which represented 22 percent of the initial sample, were coded as political threads. What were the political topics of these discussions? This question was addressed by categorising the *political* discussions, which consisted of 1176 postings, into broad topics based on the issues discussed within the various *coherent* lines of discussion.<sup>7</sup>

There were 13 topics identified by the analysis including George Galloway's politics; bullying and codes of conduct; animal rights and conservation; the judicial system; health and the body; gender, sexuality, and discrimination; immigration, multiculturalism, and racism; the media; parliamentary politics; reality TV and society; the Iraq War and foreign policy; political philosophy; and education. The dominant topic of discussion was *George Galloway's politics*, consisting of 436 postings, which represented more than a third of the political discussions. It seems that Galloway's presence in the Big Brother house got participants talking politics. Much of the debate here dealt with his motives for appearing on the show and on whether a sitting MP should be allowed to participate in a reality TV series. However, the political discussions on Galloway were not always confined to these issues. Occasionally, the discussions branched off into debates on MPs and parliament in general. Moreover, participants here frequently discussed Galloway's politics, e.g. his political arguments, his position on the Iraq War, and his character, behaviour, and performance as an MP.

Galloway was not the only political topic of discussion. Participants often engaged in discussions on a variety of issues. Moreover, these topics were not always driven by conventional political issues. From bullying to sexuality, 42 percent of the discussions centered on issues that were more individualised and lifestyle oriented.

## Results: The Normative Conditions

*Rational-critical debate* requires that political talk be guided by rationality and critical reflection.<sup>8</sup> In terms of rationality, arguments are preferred over assertions. There were 825 claims made. Out of these claims, 591 were reasoned, which represented 72 percent of all claims, indicating that providing reasoning with a claim was the norm. In terms of postings, nearly 40 percent provided arguments, whereas only 16 percent contained assertions. Together, the exchange of claims, which rep-

resented 54 percent (796 postings) of the postings, was the guiding communicative form. In terms of critical reflection, all those arguments that directly challenged or contradicted another claim or argument were considered to have achieved critical reflection. Forty-two percent of all arguments contained critical reflection, which represented 17 percent of the postings.

*Coherence* requires that participants stick to the topic of discussion. Thus, postings within each thread were first analysed and then categorised into lines of discussion based on the issues discussed. By determining the number of topic changes and more importantly, the relevance of those changes, the level of coherence was ascertained. Within the 38 discussion threads, 98 lines of discussion were identified. Participants did not diverge at all from the original topic in only nine of these threads. That said, within the remaining 29 threads, there were 40 lines of discussion, which consisted of only 193 postings, coded as complete departures.<sup>9</sup> In other words, 87 percent of the postings were coherent.

*Continuity* requires that a discussion carry on until some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning it. Continuity was examined by determining the level of extended debate and convergence. The level of extended debate was measured via the presence of strong-strings, i.e. the depth of the exchange arguments. A strong-string refers to a minimum of a three-argument interaction, ideally in the form of critical reflection. There were 53 strong-strings. The average number was nearly nine with the largest totalling 42 claims. Fifty-five percent of all claims (455 claims) were involved in strong-string exchanges, which represented 30 percent of the postings. Furthermore, 88 percent of strong-string claims were reasoned with arguments containing critical reflection representing slightly more than half, indicating the rational and critical nature of these exchanges.

Convergence was the second indicator of continuity, which gauged the level of agreement achieved during the course of a discussion by identifying commissive speech acts. There were 30 commissives identified, which represented only two percent of the postings. In order to determine the level of convergence, the number of commissives was compared with the number of lines of discussion. The sample consisted of 38 threads, which contained 47 *political* coherent lines of discussion.<sup>10</sup> The average number of commissives per line of discussion was 0.64. Furthermore, 29 percent (or 14 lines) contained at least one act of convergence.

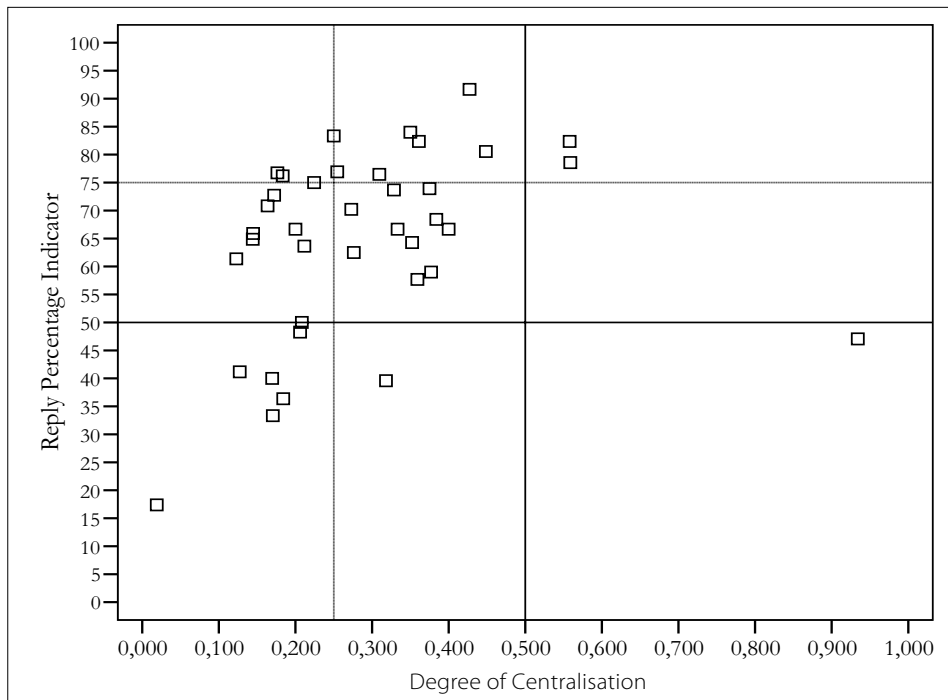
*Reciprocity* requires that participants read and reply to each other's posts. It was assessed by determining and combining the level of replies with a degree of centralisation measurement. First, as Figure 2 shows, the level of replies was moderately high. Twelve out of the 38 threads had a reply percentage indicator of  $\geq 75$  percent. While nearly half of the threads (18 threads) contained a percentage of replies of  $\geq 50$  percent but  $< 75$  percent. The percentage of replies for the whole sample was 65 percent.

Regarding the degree of centralisation, the measurement is set on a scale of zero to one with zero representing the ideal decentralised thread and one the ideal centralised thread.<sup>11</sup> First, Figure 2 indicates that only three threads were moderately to highly centralised (threads  $\geq .500$ ). These threads resembled more a one-to-many or many-to-one type of discussion rather than a web of interaction. Second, 17 of the 38 threads were moderately decentralised (threads between .250 and .500). In these threads, even though there were still several central participants,

the connections were more dispersed. Finally, nearly half of the threads (18 of 38 threads) were highly decentralised (threads  $\leq .250$ ). The connections here between participants were distributed more equally.

Finally, concerning the combined analysis, those threads within the top left quadrant, strong decentralised web quadrant, were considered to have a moderate to high level of reciprocity. As is shown, 28 of the 38 threads fell within this quadrant. In order to make a sharper distinction between these threads, a second set of criteria was added (represented by the dotted lines) as a way of distinguishing between those threads possessing moderate levels with those containing high levels of reciprocity. As is shown, there were four threads that contained an ideal level of reciprocity (threads  $\geq 75$  percent and  $\leq .250$ ) while six threads maintained a strong, moderately decentralised web of interaction, in other words, a moderately high level of reciprocity (threads  $\geq 75$  percent and between  $.250$  and  $.500$ ). Given the modest level of replies, a majority of the threads within this quadrant (18 threads) fell below the dotted line with eight representing highly decentralised threads and 10 moderately decentralised threads.

Figure 2: Level of Replies and Degree of Centralisation in the Political Threads of the Channel 4's Celebrity Big Brother Forum (1479 postings in 38 threads; January 2006)



*Reflexivity* requires that participants reflect other participants' arguments against their own. The first step in determining the level of reflexivity is to establish the type and level of evidence use. The use of evidence suggests that a participant has taken the time to reflect upon the opposing position because in order to relate evidence to one's own or opposing argument they must know and to some extent

understand the opposing position (Kuhn 1991). Overall, in terms of evidence use, 41 percent of all arguments contained supporting evidence. There were four types of evidence identified, which were examples, comparisons, facts/sources, and experiences. Examples were most frequently used, accounting for 45 percent. Examples typically were of the housemates' behaviours and statements (usually in the house) such as their bullying behaviour, their smoking habits, and Galloway's political statements. Comparisons and facts/sources represented 23 and 24 percent respectively, while experiences were the least common at only 8 percent. Regarding the use of facts/sources, participants typically dropped links to news media reports and government/non-government public information sites as the below posting illustrates:

Harold: Oh, and if anyone thinks it's despicable that Galloway isn't representing his constituents, go to the Hansard site <<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/hansrd.htm>> and have a look at who's said what (or not) and who has attended (or likely not).

The second step in ascertaining the level of reflexivity is to identify reflexive arguments. When a posting or series of postings (1) provided a reasoned claim; (2) used evidence to support that claim; (3) was responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (4) and provided evidence in support of that defence or challenge, they were coded as part of a reflexive argument. When these criteria were applied, they identified 20 reflexive arguments, consisting of 85 messages, which represented 6 percent of the postings and 13 percent of all arguments. The average number was slightly more than four messages per argument with the largest totalling eleven.

*Empathy* was gauged by determining the level of communicative empathy. It requires that participants convey their empathetic considerations to others. There was one trend identified, which was the communication of third-person empathy. On occasions, when participants were discussing the behaviour and statements of Big Brother housemates, they would empathise with them and communicate this to fellow forum participants, as Matilda's posting below illustrates:

Matilda: That was really uncomfortable viewing. I actually feel like crying myself I'm amazed how how well Traci coped so well with the way she was being treated. WHY did no one step in?? ok so shes a bit all American cheerleady type but there was absolutley no need for Pete to treat her in that way. 😞 I hope she wins now. I think it touched into when I was bullied at school I really want to cry about it. 😞

In this thread, Matilda empathises with Traci Bingham who was being bullied by Pete Burns; she brings her third-person empathy to the discussion. Matilda's posting reveals her bullied past, which eventually ignited a political discussion on bullying and British youth. Moreover, during this discussion, it sparked internal empathetic exchange between participants on their bullied experiences. However, such exchanges were infrequent in comparison to the total number of postings. In particular, there were 22 messages coded as communicative empathy, which represented less than two percent of the postings.

## Results: Expressives

Expressives were a common ingredient of political talk, appearing in 41 percent of the postings. The most common expressive was humour. It accounted for 45

percent of expressives, which represented 20 percent of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three aspects on the use of humour. First, within the context of everyday conversation, humour may be used for a variety of reasons from expressing frustration and anger towards authority to criticising another (Koller 1988). Three general trends emerged regarding the use of humour. Participants tended to use humour (1) to entertain; (2) as a form of social bonding; and/or (3) to criticise, assess, or provoke thought.

The most common use of humour was *to entertain*. Humour here usually came in the form of wisecracks, caricature, sarcasm, anecdotes, jokes, and banter. There were two focuses. First, humour was used to make fun of the Big Brother house-mates. For example, the two postings below come from a thread on Pete Burns's coat, which was confiscated and examined by police due to allegations that it was made of gorilla's fur:

James: I'd like to see Galloway wear a pete burns coat. Yeahm you read that right. Lets 'process' pete...and get some good use out of him. On Galloway...Pete might look good.



George: Pass the Morsel

In this thread, a discussion on animal rights and the fur trade emerged. During the course of the discussion, several participants engaged in a humour fest. As the above postings illustrate, such humour was often accompanied by malicious delight. Humour here tended to be less constructive in relation to the issue under discussion and orientated more towards "having a laugh." Moreover, the use of pictures, like above, to tell jokes or to present caricature was employed, suggesting a culture and commitment to entertaining fellow participants.



Second, a substantial portion of humour under “to entertain” focused on good-natured teasing and the exchange of witty remarks between and about participants in the form of banter. Banter was the most frequent type of humour used. Banter appeared to serve two functions. In addition to entertaining, banter acted as social glue; it functioned as a means of *social bonding*. These types of exchanges tended to be playful and flirtatious in nature. They seemed to unite forum participants creating a sense of shared experiences (participants would refer to these types of exchanges even days after they occurred) and fostering a friendly and sociable atmosphere. This sort of good-natured banter was common; 147 of 289 humorous comments (51 percent) were involved in this type of exchange. However, banter led discussions off the topic; 72 percent were off the topic of discussion.

The final pattern was *to criticise, assess, or provoke thought*. Humour has a critical function e.g. questioning, criticising, and assessing politicians, government, or society in general. Humour here usually came in the form of satire via sarcasm, exaggeration, comparison, and anecdotes, as the below postings illustrate:

Elizabeth: A Member of the UK parliament is under no obligation to do anything whatsoever during their term. except... to swear allegiance once...to HM the Queen/King. Thats all. Ol' Georgie is more than allowed to be there.

Edward: Well. The evictions are a little less boringly predictable than General Elections. That's how we should get the vote UP for political elections. If we were voting to EVICT MPs from Parliament, we'd have close to a 100% turnout. 😊

The two postings come from a discussion on whether a sitting MP should be allowed to participate on a reality TV series. In both cases, participants use humour to express their cynicism towards the current state of parliament. In the first example, Elisabeth uses sarcasm to criticize MPs' job performance or lack thereof, while in the second example Edward offers a comical remedy to improve voter turnout. Unlike above, humour here was supportive and constructive to the political issues under discussion.

The second aspect of humour was its social structure. Humour invited more humour in the form of humour fests. For example, when a participant posted a wisecrack, it often ignited an exchange of humorous comments. Out of the 289 postings containing humour, 56 percent were involved in humour fests. There were 29 fests. The average number was six with the largest totalling 36 postings.

The final aspect of humour was its relationship, or lack thereof, with various variables of deliberation. First, humour on a few occasions was used as a weapon of degrading or resulted in flaming; 10 postings were tied to humour in this way. On these occasions, humour was used to make fun of another participant or was interpreted as such. Regarding coherence, humour acted as a distraction to political talk; 41 percent of all humorous comments were off the topic of discussion.

Emotional comments accounted for 31 percent of all expressives and appeared in 14 percent of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three aspects on their use. First, when participants expressed emotions, they commonly expressed negative emotions. Anger was the most frequently used emotion; 66 percent of emotional comments expressed some form of anger, which was usually directed towards Big Brother housemates. Anger was expressed mostly through statements of dislike, disgust, and annoyance. Though the level of negative emotions was high, participants

also posted expressions of appreciation, admiration, approval, and longing.

The second aspect of emotional comments was their social structure. Similar to humour, emotional comments fuelled more comments that were emotional in the form of rant sessions. These were exchanges where participants vented their disgust, annoyance, and dislike towards Big Brother housemates, as the postings below illustrate:

Victoria: I don't think i have ever seen anyone so self absorbed, disgusting, vile self opinionated, and every horrible word under the sun in my life. What a revolting man.

Mary: I don't think I can express how disgusting I think this man is?!

It really worries me that he is in a position of power in this country. Well, hopefully was.

Surely there is no way he can continue to represent anyone in this country from now? If I lived in Bethnal Green or Bow, I would move. ASAP.

Stephen: I just want to wipe that smug smile off his face. 🤢

Mary: How can anyone who he is supposed to represent can ever believe a word that comes out of his mouth now I don't know. He should be kicked out of the show and kicked out of parliament. How can anyone want that vile, nasty, sneaky man as their MP I don't know. He is a bully, a snake, a smug b\*\*\*\*d and he makes my blood boil!! 🤢

Charles: he was a total D\*CK on last night's show.

In this thread, a discussion on Galloway's attempts to discuss politics in the Big Brother house turns into a rant session on Galloway's behaviour. Participants were more interested in expressing their anger and disgust for Galloway than talking about whether politics and reality TV mix. These types of exchanges were often raw and vulgar. Moreover, they tended to be polarised; they ranted together under a common feeling and not at each other. Out of the 204 postings coded as emotional comments, 43 percent were involved in rant sessions. There were nine sessions. The average number was nine with the largest totalling 19 postings.

The final aspect of emotional comments was their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. Emotional comments, when used, were fairly often used during the exchange of claims; 42 percent of emotional comments were expressed via arguments. Given the level of intense anger expressed, there was a tendency for these types of arguments to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude, as Jane's posting below illustrates:

Jane: George Galloway is a disgusting, corrupt quasi-fascist dictator-loving \*\*\*\*\*. He is notorious for licking Saddam's arse, but now that Saddam has been toppled, he has taken to licking the butt cheeks of that other murderous tyrant, Syria's President Assad. He was expelled from the Labour party for urging Iraqis to kill British troops. He is an apologist for suicide bombers. He described the fall of the Soviet Union as the worst day of his life and has virtually admitted to being a Stalinist. His party rests on a coalition with extremist Islamists that means they have eschewed gay rights and women's rights in order to woo Muslim votes. He is utter scum, and I despise him.

In a discussion on Galloway's position on the Iraq War, Jane vents her disgust for the politician. As shown, her anger is intense and her statements are both vulgar and crude at times contributing little constructively to the debate in question.

Finally, acknowledgements accounted for 25 percent of expressives and appeared in 11 percent of the postings. There were five types identified: complimenting (60 percent), apologising (20 percent), greeting (11 percent), thanking (8 percent), and congratulating (1 percent). Complementing was most common, representing 60 percent of acknowledgements, and appearing in seven percent of the postings. Participants typically complemented another participant's humour or argument with the latter accounting for nearly half. When participants did compliment another participant's argument, it was often directed at an opposing argument as opposed to being polarised. Participants also had a tendency to apologise in advance for posting an opposing position. Statements such as "apologies if anyone is offended" were used when an argument might seem too offensive or too critical.

## The Normative Analysis

To what extent did the Big Brother forum satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere? Overall, Big Brother fared relatively well in light of the normative conditions and past studies on online deliberation. The level of rationality, coherence, and reciprocity were high, while the level of critical reflection and extended debate were moderate. However, when it came to achieving deeper levels of understanding and agreement, Big Brother did not fair well.

Rational-critical debate has been one of the most common conditions used among net-based public sphere researchers. Much of the research suggests that within a variety of political forum types, structures, and contexts participants are talking politics online rationally (Wilhelm 1999; Dahlberg 2001; Jensen 2003; Coleman 2004; Jankowski and Van Os 2004; Winkler 2005; Wright and Street 2007). For example, Wilhelm (1999, 173) concluded that participants within asynchronous forums are afforded both the time and anonymity needed to construct political messages, which reflect considered judgment. The results from Big Brother are consistent with these findings. In particular, the exchange of claims was guiding communicative form, which was typically rational in nature. The findings also indicated that a substantial portion of reasoned claims engaged in critical reflection.

Regarding coherence, the analysis indicated that when participants talked politics, they rarely strayed off the topic; 87 percent of the postings were coherent. These findings are consistent with past studies (Dahlberg 2001; Jensen 2003; Wright and Street 2007). Moreover, they reveal that coherent discussions are not exclusively reserved for professionally (pre-) moderated forums, as some of the above studies suggest. Indeed, the self- and post- moderation practiced in Big Brother can also be effective in maintaining coherent (political) talk.

Continuity was assessed by determining the level of extended debate and convergence. The analysis indicated that a substantial portion of political talk came in the form extended critical debate. This finding is not consistent with past studies (Wilhelm 1999; Brants 2002), which suggest that extended debate on a single issue was uncommon. One possible explanation is that these studies relied mostly on observations as opposed to a systematic operationalisation of extended debate. The finding does seem to fall in line with Beierle's (2004) survey research. Though his research was conducted with participants from a governmentally sponsored forum, it suggests that during the course of online debate participants developed

a sense of commitment to that debate. Regarding convergence, it seems that extended critical debate on a particular issue rarely led to convergence of opinions, falling well short of the condition. This finding is consistent with previous research (Jensen 2003; Jankowski and Van Os 2004; Strandberg 2008).

Reciprocity is another popular condition employed by past researchers. A couple of studies found low levels of reciprocity in online forums (Wilhelm 1999; Strandberg 2008). For example, Strandberg's (2008, 83) analysis of Finnish political message boards and Usenet news groups showed low levels of reciprocity thus concluding that the condition of reciprocity was hardly met. However, much of the literature does suggest that within a variety of forum types, structures, and contexts online political talk tends to be reciprocal (Dahlberg 2001; Brants 2002; Jensen 2003; Beierle 2004; Winkler 2005; Wright and Street 2007). The findings here are consistent with these latter studies; the level of replies was moderately high. However, as argued elsewhere (Graham 2008), the percentage reply indicator, which was employed by most studies, on its own is inadequate; it neglects a thread's social structure. Consequently, a degree of centralisation measurement was added. The combined analysis revealed that the political discussions maintained a high level of decentralised social interaction, indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm.

Few studies have measured reflexivity within online political talk directly. The studies that do examine it found substantial levels (Dahlberg 2001; Jensen 2003; Winkler 2005). However, unlike these findings, the analysis above revealed a low level with only 13 percent of arguments coded as reflexive.

Regarding communicative empathy, to my knowledge, there have been no studies, which have employed this condition of deliberation. Given the lack of research, assessing the level is difficult. That said, the findings suggest that communicative empathy was infrequent, representing less than two percent of the postings, indicating that achieving deeper levels of understanding (or communicating it as such) were rare.

## Expressives

What role did expressives play within political talk? Expressives appeared in more than a third of the postings. Overall, they played a mixed role in relation to political talk by both facilitating and impeding it at times. Humour was the most common expressive, and it seemed to foster a friendly communicative environment. It seems Basu (1999) was right when suggesting that humour can benefit political talk by acting as a social lubricant and glue. The use of banter in particular seemed to foster social bonds. In some ways, humour appeared to help create a communicative atmosphere where a diversity of opinions on a variety of political issues was allowed to emerge. Humour too on occasions was used in support of rational-critical debate. However, humour did not always contribute constructively to political talk. Humorous comments frequently ignited humour fests, which tended to lead to incoherent political discussions.

Emotional comments on the other hand seemed to impede political talk. Though they were used during the exchange of arguments, due to the intense anger that prevailed, these types of arguments tended to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude. As such, they contributed little constructively to the political discussions in question. Moreover, these types of arguments tended to ignited rant sessions. Here partici-

pants engaged less in reciprocal-critical exchange and more in relieving their frustrations and anger in general by joining in on a rant with fellow participants. Thus, these types of rants usually added little, in terms of understanding, to political talk.

Finally, acknowledgements appeared to facilitate political talk. The most common acknowledgement was compliments. Complimenting here was not polarised, that is, participants complimented across argumentative lines. Thus, it tended to encourage a civil and friendly atmosphere between participants on opposing sides of a position. Complimenting along with the use of preemptive apologising seemed to enable participants to express opposing positions and negotiate those positions without falling out. In sum, acknowledgements tended to create an atmosphere conducive for deliberation.

## Conclusion

Talking politics online is not bound to political communicative spaces. The analysis above illustrates that this fundamental element crucial to the public sphere is taking place online in spaces dedicated to popular forms of entertainment. However, net-based public sphere researchers have tended to neglect such spaces. This is problematic because, as recent survey research suggests, those who participate in online discussions are more likely to talk politics in nonpolitically oriented spaces (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009). Moreover, those participants who talk politics in political spaces probably differ from those who e.g. participate in reality TV forums. Therefore, in order to provide a more comprehensive and accurate account of online political talk and the public sphere, we need to start widening our scope of investigation.

Future research should begin identifying political talk not only within spaces dedicated to fans of popular culture but also within sites attached to for example: lifestyles and hobbies, sports, friendship, support and self-help groups, occupations and trades, and consumerism – spaces where everyday political talk is likely to emerge. Research here should not only examine the discursive structure and normative characteristics of political talk in light of the public sphere, but should also investigate the mixing of everyday life, popular culture, and political culture that takes place within these spaces. For example, such spaces offer us an opportunity to explore the relationship between the personal and the political, moments when citizens make connections from their everyday lives to society, offering us insight into *their* concerns. Moreover, they provide us an opportunity to investigate political talk from citizens who are probably not actively engaged in the formal political process.

What makes these spaces interesting too is that the participants who engage in political talk are not there to talk politics and may not believe they are doing so allowing them to avoid to some degree the negative connotations that are typically associated with talking conventional politics today, possibly leading to more *deliberative* talk. However, this raises the question of whether participants within these spaces regard the more lifestyle-based forms of political talk that I describe above as political. One of the limitations of this study is that it focuses solely on the text thereby neglecting the perceptions of participants. Studies should employ questionnaires, interviews, and/or focus groups in order to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and motives for engaging in such talk within these spaces.

Another question that emerges from this study is whether and to what extent such spaces empower citizens, leading to public engagement and participation in formal politics. Do such spaces foster “proto-political” engagement as Dahlgren (2009) describes? That is, to what extent are these types of performative practices supportive in a movement towards participation in the formal political process? Questions like these call for not only more longitudinal research on participation within these spaces, but also ethnography studies that focus on how (and whether) this connects and transfers into participation in formal politics, something currently lacking in net-based public sphere research.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the analysis above reveals that expressives can make a distinct contribution to political talk, to deliberation. Though the philosophical and theoretical debate here is thick, net-based public sphere researchers specifically and political communication scholars in general have tended to neglect the use of expressives. Given the lack of empirical research, there remains a fundamental need for more descriptive studies, studies that focus on how the use of expressive interact and influence the more traditional conditions of deliberation. More work similar to Polletta and Lee’s (2006) research on the use of storytelling for example would also add to our understanding. Moreover, as initial research suggests, the context (e.g. political or nonpolitical) and issues of deliberation may make a difference with regard to the role expressives play in political talk (Graham forthcoming). More studies that compare the use of expressive within various contexts on different issues would provide us more insight. Such research for example would help practitioners and researchers develop more effective facilitating and moderating functions for online deliberative initiatives such as e-consultations.

## Notes:

1. This paper is based on my dissertation (Graham 2009), which is available at the University of Amsterdam’s public repository. <<http://dare.uva.nl/record/314852>>
2. There are 11 conditions. However, due to the scope of this article, five have been omitted. See Graham (2009) for a comprehensive account.
3. Habermas focuses on the cognitive process of what he calls “ideal role taking” (1996, 228-230), while paying little attention to its affective side.
4. See Graham (2010) for an analysis on the use of expressives in online political talk.
5. The data was taken from all those threads originating in January 2006. <<http://www.bbfans.co.uk/viewforum.php?f=27>>
6. When participants posted comments on government, policy, law, etc. criteria one was assumed. Note also that all call signs have been replaced with invented ones.
7. There were 303 postings coded as nonpolitical and/or incoherent, which were not included.
8. It went beyond the scope of this paper to assess the validity of argumentation used. Rather, the focus was placed on whether opinions stated were supported by argumentation. Note that a single post may have contained multiple claims.
9. Eleven of the 58 coherent lines (110 postings) were nonpolitical lines of discussion.
10. Only the commissives posted in the political coherent lines of discussion were included.
11. It is based on De Nooy et al. (2005, 126) degree of centralisation measurement.
12. See Wright’s (Forthcoming) discussion here on a new agenda for online deliberation research.

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# INTERACTIVITY AS A METAPHOR OF ONLINE NEWS

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## Abstract

Have users challenged the power of incumbent media through interactivity, and, if so, to what extent and to what end? The front pages and their linked features of online newspapers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy are examined as instances of interactivity in practice. A methodological path to analyse interactivity practices in online newspapers is proposed. The structures and the more frequent models of interactivity applied; the types of forums; the communicative flux between readers and editorial staffs; modalities of self-presentation, both of readers and journalists; and the rituality of their relations in forums are set out and analysed from a number of perspectives. The study demonstrates that online newspapers in the first stage of internet diffusion remain in a stage of pre-interactivity.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Interactivity has become a buzzword in the revitalisation of many themes in studies of technology and society, of journalism, of political communication and of uses of ICTs. More than a conceptually strong category, as Jensen's analysis (1998) might suggest, interactivity has worked as a metaphor of the new: of the new media and of the new potentialities of ICTs. It has attracted many analyses and studies which have tried to understand the potentially more proactive role of users. Of course, as Semino (2008) argues, metaphors in scientific debate influence in turn the development, the direction, and the meaning of the scientific discourse itself. Indeed, interactivity has been a key consideration in analysis of new media.

With the Internet, the predominant one-way communication model of traditional news media, often characterised by artificial and inadequate modes of audience feedback, acquired a possible alternative in the interactive digital environment of the global network (Bordewijk and Van Kaam 1986; Boczkowski 1999, 2004; Hall 2001; Kung et al. 2008). The hope for an alternative model of public interaction has foreseen in the spread of the Internet a new possibility for revitalising public discourse (Shane 2004; Brants 2005). However, the structural facility to offer a more equal communication status for every participant is a required if far from sufficient condition for a more democratic and symmetrical communication. It is thus necessary to investigate how the technology is deployed in reality, in order to assess how practices in the use of public internet communication have responded positively to this hope. Interactivity, perhaps by its nature as a "multidimensional construct" (Downes and McMillan 2000), has many definitions (Heeter 1989; Aoki n.d.a.); it is often described as a means of overcoming the mono-directionality of the message from the source to various publics and of creating a variety of communicative forms (Hoffman et al. 1995; Deuze 2003, 2007). In a more sophisticated model, Rafaeli proposes to see it as "variable characteristic of communication settings" (Rafaeli 1988). In 2002, Spiro Kiouisis comes to the conclusion that "little consensus has been reached concerning interactivity, but as a quality of media it can be seen in the form, content and structure of technology and their relation to the user" (Kiouisis 2002, 370-371).

Kim and Sawhney (2002) argue that there are, essentially, three approaches to interactivity. One is the communicative approach, which elaborates interactivity as being concerned with the communicators and the exchange of messages between them (Bretz 1983). It defines as "interactive" those media that simulate interpersonal exchange through communicative channels (Carey 1989) and make multi-directional communicative flows possible (Markus 1987). This simulation, however, is clumsy and impoverished. The parties concerned do not have equal rights over the communicative space, nor do they have the same communicative competence. This approach, which sees dialogue in co-presence as the ideal type of interactivity (Duncan 1989), tends, however, to overestimate the interactivity of body-to-body communication in itself, since it does not recognise that such communication is structurally limited by the social division of power, by etiquette, and by personality difference.

The second approach, again according to Kim and Sawhney (2002), is that of the media environment (Steuer 1992), which maintains that interactive media are those in which users' participation can modify the form and content of the medial envi-

ronment in real time. This approach can be further developed in the light of actor network theories (Latour 1996) and social co-construction (Pinch and Oudshoorn 2003). While traditional media have a mono-directional, hierarchic structure, new interactive media may offer a platform in which users can also become producers, and re-balance the power relation in favour of the public or the community (Bucher 2002, Jankowski and Prehn 2002). In recent years, this has been labelled, when applied to journalism, as networked journalism, wherein professional news workers and amateurs work together, newsgathering and processing information (Beckett and Mansell 2008).

The third approach, proposed by Kim and Sawney (2002, 221), is that which rightly situates interactivity within the power relations that structure communication. Let us remember that power in communication means, for the producer, the proactive ability to select the argument, to decide how to present it, to determine who can be the interlocutor, as well as to determine the time, duration, place and cost of the communication, while, for the consumer, power means at most a capacity for reaction and defence, or perhaps the option to be passive (Schönbach 1997, Vorderer 1995).

These three approaches help us understand important aspects of interactivity of online newspapers, which is the objective of the research in the present study. Here, the discourse so far has been used, albeit with qualification, above all to hail the bi and multi-directional potentialities of new media as the beginning of an era in which publics are seen as able to influence editorial policies, procure and even co-produce news together with editorial staffs, have a more equal and reciprocal relationship with “their” newspapers, and create a new relationship with other readers. Given these premises, interactivity is considered technically as the possibility of shifting control over production and distribution of information from source to public (Rafaeli 1988, 115) and giving more power to users (Chan et al. 2006, Hodgkinson 2007). Pearce (1997, 224) goes so far as to consider interactivity a “subversive” element, with the potential to re-shape the structure of mass communication. Yet it is often difficult to separate rhetoric from analysis and celebration of technical possibilities from the uses actually grafted on to them (Hollander et al. 2002, Richards 2006, Robinson 2006).

Our principal research question is to what extent and end, after a decade of experimentation and implementation of interactivity in online newspaper sites, users and their behaviour have challenged the power of media in the selected European countries? More specifically, we are interested in whether a broadening of democratic and symmetrical communication took place; are news topics still defined by media groups, or has the Internet’s capacity for interactivity extended the number of voices raising and discussing public issues?

As we seek to address these questions, it is important to recognise that the rapid development of social media in recent years, along with the rise of citizen journalism, has added new dimensions to the potential for change in public discourse. Nevertheless, the intention here is to focus on the interactive performance of classic media, on the basis that such media remain as a fundamental component – the “Fourth Estate” – in democracies.

The following section of the article sets out aims and methods. Then we move on to present the results, analysing the structures and the more frequent models of

interactivity applied in the selected online newspapers; the organisation of types of forums; the communicative flux between readers and editorial staffs; modalities of self-presentation, both of readers and journalists; and the rituality of their relations in forums. The data collected allow us to carry out the analysis from several perspectives. Finally, we present our conclusions concerning interactivity in online newspaper websites.

## Methods and Aims

The hypothesis that we advance is that online newspapers remain in a stage of pre-interactivity, made up by the co-existence of para-social interaction behaviour on the part of online newspaper publishers, and ortho-social interactions on the part of their readers (Rafaeli 1988, 124). Keeping in mind our research questions, we undertook a project which aims to explore how, in four European countries – Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy – the “front” or home page of the most widespread online dailies embodies or links to interactivity in practice. This is a sub-project of a large, cross-cultural study carried out in 16 countries, which compared print and online newspapers (Van der Wurff and Lauf 2005, van der Wurff et al. 2008), that aims to deepen our understanding of interactivity. Specifically, we analyse a sample comprising the following online publications: Bulgaria – *Standart* (Standard), *Monitor* and *Sega* (Now); Estonia – *Postimees* (Postman) and *Eesti Päevaleht* (Estonian Daily), which are two national mid-market (sometimes also called quality papers in order to distinguish them from the national tabloid) Estonian-language dailies; Ireland – *The Irish Times*, *the Irish Independent* and *the Irish Examiner*, the Republic’s three national non-tabloid dailies; and Italy – *Il Corriere della Sera* (The Evening Messenger), *La Repubblica* (The Republic), *Il Sole 24 Ore* (The Sun 24 Hours), *La Stampa* (The Press) and *Il Messaggero* (The Messenger), the five most-read newspapers.

We decided to collect data related to the selected outlets on October 12, 2004, with the purpose of capturing a random snapshot of interactive practices. Interactivity in a newspaper website might be composed of many elements: e-mail, forums, chat, newsgroups, polls, hypertext, online games, the ability to personalise the home page (e.g. choice of language), news topic personalisation, and so on (Greer and Mensing 2003). Among these elements, we chose to examine only those that we judged most relevant in relation to our objective of research: e-mails, forums, letters to the editor, polls, chat and/or interviews with prominent people.

The main objectives of this study were threefold: (1) the analysis of the structure of interactivity of the online edition; that is, to investigate if and to what extent emails, forums, polls and letters to the editor and other features are present in the front page; (2) the examination of the physiognomy of forums: that is, the dimensions and the characteristics of communicative fluxes with users, and the organisation models applied by editorial staff to manage them. We chose to highlight these as our second unit of analysis because they provide “objective” data, easily accessible by users and also by researchers; (3) the analysis of the interaction between users and newsrooms, by starting with the structure of messages published in forums, if any, on the specified day and examining the nature of communication between users and editorial staffs, the identity expressed in the forums by journalists and users, and the type of relation and reutilisation which develops among users, journalists and forumists.

## Background of Online Newspapers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy

Before illustrating the results of the research, let us provide a short background of the countries and outlets which we selected and which we have been studying since 2003 (Fortunati and Sarrica 2004a, 2004b; Fortunati and Sarrica 2005; Fortunati 2005a, 2005b; Fortunati and Sarrica 2006; Fortunati et al. 2007; Raycheva 2005; Raycheva et al. 2005; Raycheva 2006; O'Sullivan 2005; O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Balčytienė and Harro-Loit 2009).

**Bulgaria.** Although Bulgaria is a small media market, a rich print milieu includes 424 newspapers (64 dailies) with annual circulation in 2004 of 318,069,000 (NSI 2009). From the late 1990's, users have been able to choose between a variety of off-line and online news services of varying quality and with diverse content. However, since web editions were seen as supplementary, their layout in 2004 was unsophisticated, and their content undeveloped.

At the time of the study, the online versions of the newspapers *Standart*, *Monitor* and *Sega* have remained broadly similar to their printed versions, as previously observed (Raycheva, 2005). They are not updated during the day, have meagre hyperlinking, offer static images and no sound, and have skeletal staffing. Much progress has been achieved since 2004 adding changes in the layout, moving images and sound, much better hyperlinking, and uploading to Facebook.

In 2004, compared to the offline editions, newspaper websites seem to focus more on letters, messages and the invitation to readers to comment. Online editions are also attempting to break new ground in polls/user surveys, forums and internal links. On October 12, *Standart* publishes eight news items, *Monitor* six, and *Sega* two.

Among these three online newspapers, *Sega* provides most options for interactivity. Practically every news item can create a forum, and these are organised in a section under the title Sky Forum. Comments are grouped in Forum Clubs attached to the main sections of the newspaper, such as Society, Economics, Politics, Culture, Sports, Contacts. Forums are usually managed by a webmaster, and users correspond with each other except for when, twice monthly, they communicate for two hours with an invited guest. Journalists (reporters or editors) do not take part in this conversation. A significant part of this conversation is re-published in two pages in the print edition. The users, some of them regular participants in the forums, also exchange off-topic opinions. They often use inappropriate language and various emoticons. Some comments include photos or other images. Users can also play games, chat, visit virtual clubs on different topics, exchange photos, etc. Communication is effected only between users hidden behind nicknames, and there is no comment by a journalist. The first news item of the sample generates 143 comments in the forum (up to 50 are visible), and the second 31 (all visible).

*Standart* offers several options for interactivity: comments on articles (for the Bulgarian and for the English online edition), e-mail letters to the editor (invisible to other users), and an SMS service. Comments on articles are published, with the e-mail addresses of the senders, in a dedicated section. Forums facilitating exchange of opinions, either between users or between users and journalists, are practically non-existent, although comments are carefully read by some of the editors of the

newspaper's society section, as they revealed to us in an informal conversation. A small number of comments were chosen for printing in the off-line edition. Of the published comments, only two relate to one of the eight news items on the front page of the online edition.

The newspaper with the fewest interactive elements in 2004 is *Monitor*, which offers only an e-mail facility. In a practice similar to that of *Standart*, some messages are published in the print edition. Due to the high level of inappropriate language in messages, *Monitor* in 2004 has discontinued the use of forums. In addition, it has abandoned poll/user surveys, due to concerns over voting fairness.

**Estonia.** Estonia's media system has a small market – advertising revenue was €58m in 2003 (TNS-EMOR, 2009) – and a liberal media policy. Estonian newspapers started to create online versions in the mid-1990s. In 2004, as today, there were four national dailies on the market published in the Estonian language and three in Russian, of which just one remained in 2009. Print dailies are the dominant original news producers online. In 2002/2003, 74 percent of the Estonian-language population and 36 percent of the Russian-speaking population read national dailies, although newspaper readership has decreased since the 1990s especially among young people (Vihalemm 2004, Vihalemm et al. 2004). The dominant entities in the news market are media corporation Eesti Meedia (a part of international Schibsted corporation), which owns press as well as electronic media organisations, and the Ekspress Group and Bonnier (owner of the business daily). National dailies *Postimees* (belonging to Eesti Meedia) and *Eesti Päevaleht* (owned by Ekspress Group) are rather similar dailies. Like Italian newspaper organisations, Estonian newspapers have tried to expand into other sectors, with, for example, *Eesti Päevaleht*, venturing into book publishing.

In Estonian online dailies, interactivity comprises forums, polls and e-mails. The dominant feature of forums is the ability of readers/users to comment on each article, which generates a high number of contributions. Few news items draw no comment at all in the "Commentariums." Readers also can evaluate these comments. In the context of the present research, the collective commentaries of each news item are regarded as a forum. Most commentators use nicknames, and readers are asked to assist in moderation by pointing out libellous comments. In 2007-2008, most dailies introduced restrictions closing off comments that risked an intrusion into privacy.

In April 2005, those commenting in *Eesti Päevaleht* were required to be identified: they had to be registered with their real name or a nickname and e-mail address and they had to log in. However, registration was withdrawn after a year or so, as the number of comments dropped.

In 2004, *Eesti Päevaleht* has had an online interview every three to four months, in which readers can ask questions of a public figure. In the other daily, *Postimees*, almost every news story is commented on (in a forum), but readers also have the ability to create a new discussion topic. *Postimees* also asks users to help moderate its interactive sections by reporting inappropriate comments.

**Ireland.** In Ireland, in 2004, with a then fast-growing economy driving all sectors, newspapers were read by 91.4 percent of adults in the Republic, (JNRS cited by Media Live 2005). Circulations and advertising revenues had followed an upward

trajectory since the start of the boom in the 1990s. A notable feature in this time had been investment by British interests, especially through Irish editions of tabloids and Sundays but also in regionals. The national daily broadsheet sector (with which this article is concerned) was shared between the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Examiner* and *The Irish Times*, with the latter positioned as the “paper of reference” but with the mid-market *Independent* enjoying the highest circulation. *Independent News and Media*, which also has extensive international interests, is dominant in the newspaper market, a situation that occasionally raises concern over concentration of ownership and control, but with little regulatory action in response (Horgan et al. 2007). While *The Irish Times* had been a pioneer of early news publishing on the Internet in the early 1990s, by 2004 its online division had experienced severe cutbacks. Other titles had made modest investments in online editions, the content of which largely mirrored their print counterparts. Online editions of daily newspapers in Ireland at the time of data collection carry little material generated by readers. This can, at least in the first instance, be put down to the severely constrained opportunity to contribute. In only one of three newspapers studied is it apparent from the front page that readers can post to a forum. None of the sites allows readers to comment in a forum associated with specific new items. Each re-publishes letters from the print edition (with names and addresses of contributors).

The front page of *The Irish Times*'s portal, ireland.com, and the Breaking News section of the online newspaper edition itself – though not the front page of the actual online edition – carry a daily poll inviting Yes/No responses, after which readers are invited to post comments under the heading “Your Reaction” in the Breaking News section. Readers are told to keep contributions relevant, and posts are said to be filtered by a monitor for abusive content or libel. Comments have to be submitted before 11.30 pm. The *Irish Independent* online edition publishes print edition letters online and also offers a Yes/No poll on a pre-determined topic. Readers are allowed no means of posting responses directly, but are invited to do so by email. They are advised that they should keep contributions short, and that abusive messages will not be posted. *The Examiner* site advertises a bulletin board as well as a chat room. However, since the day on which data was collected, the publisher has closed the forums, citing legal precautions. The *Examiner* also publishes print edition letters, though these are not directly linked from the front page. Perhaps the most significant development since our observation of the daily news sites is a partial freeing of interactivity via the introduction of direct reader comments on journalists' blogs and on selected opinion articles in *The Irish Times*.

**Italy.** With its traditionally low readership of daily newspapers, Italy has paradoxically a prosperous press. Daily newspapers, unable to attract more readers directly, have successfully turned their audiences into readers of books, such as novels and encyclopaedias, distributed with newspapers and now providing the bulk of revenues. The Italian news market is characterised by a few strong editorial groups such as RCS and the Gruppo Editoriale dell'Espresso, mainly connected to industrial dynasties. About 100 printed newspapers comprise almost 20 national dailies, 70 regional and local dailies, and eight free dailies. The total daily circulation of newspapers in 2004 was less than eight million copies; average readership was around 20 million persons a day (Audipress 2004). The number of dailies published online reached nearly a hundred, with a little less than half of the population hav-

ing access to the Internet. Of all Internet users, 85 percent have visited at least one news site in the previous six months.

In Italy, the structure of interactivity in the five home pages varies widely. The only interactive element present in all five is e-mail, while forums and polls are present in three. Other elements, like letters to the editor and interviews with experts, or chats with prominent persons, are less represented. Numbers of contributions vary greatly, and editors are not always able to create reader interest. Polls and invitations to vote are frequent elements in entertainment sections, but not in news and current affairs. *La Repubblica* has the biggest interactive space among Italian online dailies, formed by three different sections. *Il Sole 24 Ore* appears to follow a minimalist strategy for interactivity, with no forums apparent on the front page but with experts who respond on issues proposed by readers. The site carries forums, but they are contained in its sections without being flagged on the front page (which is the locus for this study's data collection). *La Stampa* consistently carries a number of forums, while *Il Messaggero* is the least interactive among Italian outlets, since email is the only interactive element present in the front page of its online edition.

## Results

### Structures of Interactivity

As regards Bulgarian media, on October 12, *Standart* published eight news items, *Monitor* six, and *Sega* two. In *Sega*, the two news items of *Sega*, published on the front page, attracted 174 comments in total. The first news item, entitled "Traffic police will suspend driving licenses for unpaid fines," received 143 comments (up to 50 are visible). The second – "Property prices are slightly stalled" – received 31 (all visible). In *Standart*, only two of the published comments related to one of the eight news items published on the front page. The general impression of the comments was that they were emotionally toned, and most of them included emoticons. Almost all of the comments expressed critical sentiments towards the topic. Arguments with other commentators prevailed. A small number of the comments were completely off-topic. Both comment streams in *Standart* were connected with the news item concerning the traffic police. Authors of these comments were unhappy about road conditions and did not mention the main topic at all.

In Estonia, both dailies provided a number of comments (as a part of each headline) concerning each news item or opinion article. On October 12, 2004, the overall number of news and opinion articles of *Eesti Päevaleht* (Business supplement excluded) was 105; *Postimees* only had 50 items. The most commented-upon article at *Eesti Päevaleht* ("Society needs atheistic explanations") attracted 832 comments (the article was not on the first page of the online version and the latest comments are added on 5th June 2008); other news items drew comments ranging in number from 400 to fewer than 10. The article that attracted the highest number of reactions (113) at *Postimees* on school absenteeism was also the first news item on the front page. Very few news items gathered no comments. Both dailies also provided a "top news" list of the most read news items. The commentaries included both discussion between commentators and single reaction to the article; editorial staff did not moderate comments.



In Ireland, the single *Irish Times* poll on October 12 drew 106 responses, including some substantial and reflective contributions. Postings were presented in a unified sequence, rather than in focussed discussion threads. There was no evidence of editorial staff responding. In the *Irish Independent*, which similarly invited responses to polls, no reader comments are published (contributions, usually fewer than 10, are carried on some other days, again in a single sequence). In the *Irish Examiner* online, at the time of data collection, the chat room was empty and the last forum posted was 12 days old. A recheck in early 2005 found that links from the saved forum page led to an undated notice informing the reader that the forum and chat functions had been suspended "due to concerns on legal vulnerability." In 2004, the *Irish Examiner* used the freeware vBulletin system to host its forums, of which there were four, dedicated to "People and Places" (748 posts), "Current Affairs" (253), "Business" (18) and "Sport" (3). Some general characteristics were recorded: communication in the forums was user to user, and, while discussions were anonymously moderated, there was no interaction with journalists. Discussion threads were independent of editorial content items. Included in the same bulletin board, for which a single registration is required, are forums associated with other specialised outlets developed by the publisher, such as sites dealing with sport and motoring. While the presence of a forum using a commonly deployed independent platform like vBulletin might indicate a high level of interactive freedom, and while some of the posts counts appeared substantial, it must be borne in mind that the contributions on the day were not current and, in fact, the forums were relatively inactive. It is also worth noting that the category with the highest count by far referred to social/recreational use rather than debate on public issues.

In Italy, in *Il Corriere della Sera*, the only two open forums were "The crisis of tourism in Italy: reasons and remedies," which generated two messages, and football "Championship season 2004/05," which drew 65 messages. In particular, the interactive space of *Il Corriere della Sera* was constituted by the online publication of letters to the editor, which appeared in the off-line newspaper, and seven forums managed by prominent journalists who had their own following readers (Hynds 1991, Wahl-Jorgensen 2001; 2002, Richardson and Franklin 2004). In addition, five other forums were managed by experts (whose identity is ambiguous). Anonymous moderators managed another 43 forums, where online editorial staff set a theme that readers discussed.

The front page of *La Repubblica* was made up of three sections. In the first, forums were managed by an anonymous moderator. A second section was dedicated specifically to polls. Another, entitled "Interactivity," actively sought opinions on specific topics, or ran competitions based on reader contributions, including photographs. On 12 October 2004, all of 30 forums on the front page of *La Repubblica* were already closed. Consequently, we could not collect any messages published on that day. Apart from these more conventional spaces, three forums were dedicated to stories with an emphasis on narrative rather than discussion: the first, on rock music, carried 502 posts; the second, entitled "Life as a Teacher," comprised 236 stories; and the forum "My University" had 1,127 stories. In *Il Sole 24 Ore*, eight experts responded to eight questions posed by readers. These responses were provided via a link which encouraged the reader to learn more by means of paid access to a restricted area. In *La Stampa*, four forums were run: "Caffè Buongiorno" [Coffee Good Day], "Il Meglio del Web" [Best of the Web], "Ebusiness,"

and “Lettere & Cifre” [Letters and Figures], handled by a journalist and an expert of mathematical and linguistic games. In *Il Sole 24 Ore*, letters to the editor were published along with eight messages sent to the online newsroom. Finally, it is interesting to note that “Letters to the Editor” were present in the form of a forum only in *Il Corriere della Sera*, where journalist Paolo Mieli was replying (later on he has been substituted by Sergio Romano). This column was the exact reproduction of that in the print newspaper, but in addition, it carried a selected archive of the “Letters of the Week.”

As it can be seen in Table 1, the structure of interactivity in the homepages of the 13 most read newspapers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy was rather uneven.

Table 1: The Structure of Interactivity on the Webpage of Online Newspapers

Country	Newspaper	Forum	E-mail	Poll	Interview; Letters to the editor + other forms
Bulgaria	<i>Standart</i>	Yes	Yes	Very rare	Yes, SMS
	<i>Monitor</i>	None	Yes	Irregular	Yes
	<i>Sega</i>	Yes	Yes	Very rare	Yes
Estonia	<i>Paevaleht</i>	Yes	Yes	1 (daily)	Irregular
	<i>Postimees</i>	Yes	Yes	1 (daily)	None
Ireland	<i>Irish Times</i>	None*	Yes	1 (daily)	Yes
	<i>I. Independent</i>	None	Yes	1 (daily)	None
	<i>Irish Examiner</i>	Yes	Yes	None	None
Italy	<i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	<i>La Repubblica</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	None
	<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>	None	Yes	None	Yes
	<i>La Stampa</i>	Yes	Yes	Irregular	None
	<i>Il Messaggero</i>	None	Yes	None	None

\* While The *Irish Times* does not have a forum, its poll responses provide some of this function, albeit in a crude format, and are discussed later in this article in the context of discussion of forums.

The presence or absence of features allows us to understand how the structure of interactive practices is organised in the various front pages of online editions. Moving to consider the measure of interactivity in these European countries, Table 2 shows the four interactive models of the selected editions.

Table 2: The Interactivity Models on the Front Page of Online Newspapers

Model	Newspaper	Number of features present
1. Full interactivity	<i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>	4 of 4
2. Moderate interactivity	<i>La Repubblica, Irish Times, Standart, Sega, Paevaleht, Postimees</i>	3 of 4
3. Partial interactivity	<i>Monitor, Irish Independent, Irish Examiner, Il Sole 24 Ore, La Stampa</i>	2 of 4
4. Low interactivity	<i>Il Messaggero</i>	1 of 4

As we can see in Table 2, the most widespread models of interactivity in 2004 online newspapers editions are of a moderate interactivity. The first model, that of full interactivity, is embodied only by *Il Corriere della Sera*, which offers a full range of the interactive elements in its website.

Among the elements we considered, the only one present, or linked from, all 13 front pages is e-mail. Management of e-mail between the newsroom and the readership remains, however, mysterious, in the sense that there is no trace of this communicative interplay between users and editorial staffs. Forums are present on the whole in more than half of cases: in Bulgaria, they are in evidence in two of the three online newspapers under review, in Estonia in the two newspapers analysed, in Ireland in one of three (though soon to be scrapped) and in Italy in three of five. Polls are used regularly in almost half of the sample analysed. Letters to the editor are relatively rare, and where present they correspond to those published in the print edition.

### Forums' Physiognomy and Communicative Fluxes

As one of the most essential elements of interactivity is made up by forums, we have attempted to deepen our analysis on their presence and their characteristics. Table 3 illustrates the number of forums present in or linked from the home page of the online newspapers on October 12, 2004 and their communicative fluxes, constituted by the number of messages posted in the forums by users and by the number of the answers from editorial staff. (The number of messages refers to messages posted on the day of data collection.)

Table 3: Number of Forums in Front Page of Online Newspapers and their Communication Fluxes

Newspapers in the four countries	Number of forums	Number of messages
Bulgaria: <i>Standard</i>	1	2
<i>Monitor</i>	0	0
<i>Sega</i>	2	174
Estonia: <i>Postimees</i>	38	472
<i>Eesti Päevaleht</i>	24	1294
Ireland: <i>Irish Times</i>	0	0
<i>Irish Independent</i>	0	0
<i>Irish Examiner</i>	4	0
Italy: <i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>	14	211+38 answers from ed. staff
<i>La Repubblica</i>	33	0
<i>Il Sole 24 ore</i>	0	8*
<i>La Stampa</i>	15	51+11 answers from ed. staff
<i>Il Messaggero</i>	0	0

\* Messages sent to the editorial staff

In the Bulgarian sample, the general impression of the comments is that they are emotional rather than rational. Users' opinions in *Sega* (174 comments in total)

are supported by a wide variety of emoticons. In some cases, emoticons substitute entirely for text. Exchange of comments occurs with no moderation by the editorial staff. A tendency to express opinions off the main topic can be observed, especially in *Standart*.

In the Estonian dailies, the most commented-upon article (a column about a leader of a political party) receives 422 comments; in *Postimees*, news of plans to establish a new control system over school truants draws 113 comments. Most participants react emotionally to the published text; some add information and some merely argue with other commentators. News stories or columns that are highlighted by the newspaper (for example, lead stories or those with pictures) usually get more comments. Among the countries in the study, Estonia has the highest number of user comments.

The Italian sample shows a vibrant presence of forums. (It is only by chance, for example, that *La Repubblica*, one of the most interactive Italian online newspapers, has no messages as, on the day of our data collection, no one posted messages in its forums.) Both *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* show willingness on the part of readers to communicate and a limited number of answers from journalists to readers' comments.

On the whole, the data described in Table 3 suggests that there is a burgeoning of the space dedicated to readers' opinions. The technical possibilities offered by the web are exploited in half of the cases. However, we are still far from being able to consider forums as a driver of ideas, reflections and stimuli in which readers have such influence that they challenge the power of editorial staff. Media owners have not yet invested enough to build an organisation model inside online newspaper editorial staffs which might face this bi-vocal exchange in a real way. While readers' contributions have in turn elicited few reactions from editorial staff, the cultural impact of comments and forums on journalists might have relevance.

Nor have readers constructed an interactive model from the bottom up. Online interactivity on the whole concerns less than 10 percent of Internet users (Nielsen 2006). The large majority do not seek interactivity: they prefer to lurk, anonymous and silent. They are more interested in consuming what the web has to offer rather than investing time, money and effort to re-design the web's information or to modify the process of production, elaboration and distribution of news online. Even as blogs and social networks offer an alternative model, surfers at a mass level gathering at newspaper sites have remained the sons and daughters of book and newspaper readers, interpreters of a model that has separated reading activity from writing.

A last observation: while our data collection is confined to one day, newspaper forums also comprise an archive of messages, often dating to the beginning of the section. New messages and old ones share the same location, creating a spatial contiguity that is unfamiliar. This differs from how the newspaper's own content distinguishes the news from the social memory, by dedicating an archive to older material.

#### Interaction between Users and Newsrooms

In order to explore more deeply the features of interactivity in these online newspapers, we analysed further the characteristics of communicative fluxes in

forums, namely: who is communicating with whom, and the level of identification between the communicators. Based on empirical observations of these 13 newspapers, we could outline six possible communicative fluxes in online newspapers or *traffic models*:

1. Journalist sets the agenda, users respond and journalist might answer;
2. Moderator (webmaster, a reader or someone else) controls the forum and users communicate with him/her, other users or a specific user;
3. Expert provides answers on a particular subject, users communicate with him/her, with other users or a specific user;
4. Users communicate with each other;
5. Users communicate with each other and the journalist;
6. Media organisation sets the agenda, users react and the forum is managed by an anonymous moderator.

Table 4: Communication Models Applied in the Forums

Country	Newspaper	Prevailing traffic models
Bulgaria	<i>Standart</i>	6
	<i>Monitor</i>	6
	<i>Sega</i>	3, 4, 6
Estonia	<i>Eesti Päevaleht</i>	4; 6
	<i>Postimees</i>	4; 6
Ireland	<i>Irish Times</i>	6
	<i>Irish Independent</i>	6
	<i>Irish Examiner</i>	4
Italy	<i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>	1, 3, 6
	<i>La Repubblica</i>	0
	<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>	3
	<i>La Stampa</i>	1, 3, 6
	<i>Il Messaggero</i>	0

The prevailing traffic model is No. 6 (media organisation sets the agenda and users react and managed by an anonymous moderator), followed by No. 4 (users communicate with each other), and No. 3 (expert answers on the domain). This means that the model of the forms of interactivity in the first stage of mass use of the Internet is still put in place by media organisations and dominated by them. Readers seem to be seen by media organisations as a group to be tamed in *ad hoc* spaces and structures.

To complete the picture of relations between readers and online newspapers, and their ritualisation, we considered the ways in which readers choose to reveal their identity. We reconstructed eight types of identification on the part of users and five types of identity with which media organisation present themselves.

Types of user identities of forum contributors include: (1) nickname, (2) e-mail, (3) signature, (4) name, (5) nickname and e-mail, (6) name, surname and email, (7) name and email, and (8) entirely anonymous.

Identity of media organisations ranges from (a) no identification (one should assume that someone from the staff is doing the job) to (b) journalist identified by signature, (c) anonymous moderator, (d) identified moderator, and (e) identified experts.

With these data, we have built a model that illustrates the frequency of different identities present in forums. The results are presented in Table 5. It emerges that the identity of interacting people is usually hidden behind a nickname, while the prevailing model for the identity of media organisations is collective identity, followed by anonymous moderators and identified experts.

Table 5: Model of Users' and Media Organizations' Identity in the Forums

Country	Newspaper	Identity of interacting persons	Identity of media organisation
Bulgaria	<i>Standart</i>	2	a
	<i>Monitor</i>	0 – no forums	a
	<i>Sega</i>	1	a, e
Estonia	<i>Eesti Päevaleht</i>	1	a or b
	<i>Postimees</i>	1	a or b
Ireland	<i>Irish Times</i>	1,4	a or c
	<i>Irish Independent</i>	1,4	a or c
	<i>Irish Examiner</i>	1	c
Italy	<i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>	1, 4, 5, 6, 7	b, c, e
	<i>La Repubblica</i>	0	c
	<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>	8	e
	<i>La Stampa</i>	5, 6, 7	b, c, e
	<i>Il Messaggero</i>		0

## Discussion and Final Remarks

Our study has clear limitations, confined as it is to interactivity evident from the front pages of online newspapers and captured on a single day. For technical reasons, we could not fix the time of saving the online pages; hence, the comparison of the number of forums and messages recorded is not exact. There is a naturally-arising uncertainty in the categorisation of readers' identities, given the fact that it was not always easy to distinguish a name from a surname or a nickname. It should be also noted we did not interview journalists, which makes our understanding of the aims of moderation of forums incomplete. Nevertheless, bearing in mind these limitations, our analysis of data provides some clear indications that interactivity is markedly under-developed.

Other research carried out later by some of the present authors and other colleagues on journalism and the internet (Fortunati et al. 2009, Sarrica et al. forthcoming) and on interactivity in Italy (Fortunati, Sarrica and de Luca 2007), indicates that editors' and managers' indifference towards interactivity continues. Newspapers have not invested in interactivity as a driving engine in a new conception of the newspaper based at least in part on collaboration with audiences. They did not

invest in the implementation of a newsroom organisation that would be oriented towards managing readers' input, or in designing journalistic work practices to include audiences' voices. Our research has shown that, at least in Italy, editors pass information on reader behaviours mainly to online journalists, probably because they assume that print editions cannot take advantage of such information. At the same time, however, it emerged that the majority of the journalists interviewed agree that the future of newspapers is in interactivity and multimodality. In addition, almost half of them assert that they make significant efforts to deal with readers on a voluntary basis. However, in spite of this spontaneous commitment, journalists are scarcely aware of the importance of online communities that develop around the website of their newspaper. This lack of interest is strongly correlated with the prevailing opinion among journalists interviewed that the audiences prefer print to online newspapers.

The current research adds to this understanding a visualisation, albeit partial, of the phenomenon of online newspaper interactivity in some European countries with varying market sizes. There is a certain balance among the selected countries, as they comprise a northern country (Ireland), a southern country (Italy), a post-socialist eastern country (Bulgaria) and a post-socialist northern country (Estonia). It seems that the power relation between media organisations and readers is not in play. Contrary to the perceptions of transformation of some observers (Bucher 2002), several elements delineate a scene wherein the power hierarchy seems unaltered. Users still seem to be, as Lieb (1998) writes, a "protected minority," and many online newspapers continue to consider themselves "mausoleums instead of saloons." Readers who write in forums are hosted in a space, which is apparently public but which belongs to the publisher. Feedback is allowed, not solicited, by editorial staff. Finally, it is the moderator who most often launches the issue to be discussed, decides the length (moderators continually urge users to write briefly) and the appropriateness of messages, and decides when to open and close a forum. All these elements demonstrate the asymmetric nature of the relation between readers and online newspapers. Certainly, users apply strategies to defy, necessarily in a furtive and silent way, the agenda-setting of prescribed discussions in forums. They may, for example, discuss issues other than those officially assigned to the forum or articulate their own thoughts at length. However, these are defensive tactics rather than proactive strategies aimed at radically changing the role of the reader.

Two our findings in particular, demand further reflection. One is the publication of the letters to the editor in Irish and Italian online newspapers; the other is the blocking of offensive material in Bulgaria, Ireland, and Italy. Although online publication of readers' letters is limited to only two sample countries, we could speak of a legacy model, which largely inspires the "new" interactivity of online newspapers in terms of both structure and meaning of messages, and the means of managing messages (Rafaeli 1988). This feature implies a uni-directional relation with readers: most letters are not met with a response. Readers' letters to the newspaper's editor do not represent a model of interaction between the editorial staff and readers, but assimilation to and application of the uni-directional model of mass communication by the readers. Messages in forums often seem to maintain the form of letters to the editor and share their ambiguity: they remain both a communication addressed to a specific person in his/her professional status and a communication which its author

wants to enter the public arena. Furthermore, forum contributions are treated by the online editorial staff in the same way as off-line readers' letters by print editorial staff. In both cases, messages are selected and a heading is attributed to them. The second element is the obvious need to moderate the apparently high level of abusive or ill-mannered contributions. Clearly, readers often use forums in order to vent their anger, as if frustrations accumulated over centuries with no means of expression were somehow invading the public sphere.

At this stage, a lack of democratic culture in the web fetters the formation of public opinion constructed by distinct individuals. Still anonymous masses speak. The tendency towards hidden identity seems to mean that readers do not perceive online forums as an opportunity to reveal their ideas and opinions. We are still not in a stage of full disclosure; rather, we are in a pre-political, antecedent stage, where private opinions are made public for their own sake. More than for democracy, one should look perhaps for the spectacularisation of communication in a networked society (Castells 1996-1998). The interactivity of online newspapers is often reduced to display and self-exhibition. Consequently, this phenomenon pertains more to the social than the political sphere. It may be that Internet users express the will to assert information power not via online newspapers, but in other forms, such as citizen journalism, blogs and so on, that are not connected with newspapers. Online newspaper forums are instead often inhabited by fragile identities that are still unable or unwilling to deal fully with a public dimension.

The data in our analysis support the initial hypothesis that online newspapers are still in a stage of pre-interactivity, although there are some attempts to re-define the role of gatekeepers in the newspapers. Some print editions in Bulgaria and Italy, for example, carry selected messages from online forums. This may be the first steps towards a new relationship between newsrooms and readership that would not rest on an exclusively uni-directional communication. However, responses or interventions by the editorial staff on readers' comments are rare (we found them only in Italy). Indeed, a full-fledged interactivity remains an ideal that the current practice lags behind. After more than a decade, traditional media continue to fail supporting a genuine interactivity, which means not only to set it up but also to keep it alive and effective. Online newspapers seem to hesitate providing a truly bi- or multi-directional flux between newsrooms and readers. The implementation and maintenance of interactive communication is time consuming, and its outcomes are not easily measurable, thus more sustaining financial and organisational investments would be needed to make it feasible. Diverting the interactive process to a discussion among readers themselves, building thus a kind of virtual communicative ghetto, may be a technology driven "tactical" solution which does not give hope yet for higher levels of interactivity between journalists and audiences.

### Note:

1. A paper relating to an earlier stage of the development of this research was presented at a conference in Barcelona in 2005, and published in the event's proceedings (Fortunati et al 2005).

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# ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VOICE AND AUTHORITY IN ON MESSAGE COMMUNICATION

BRETT OMMEN

## Abstract

On Message communication allows political authority to fill the demand for authorised speech with a stable message reinforced by uniform performances. The strategy indicates the ways in which changes in the material and institutional mechanisms of discursive practice fundamentally alter the categories by which we understand, analyse, and respond to rhetorical productions. The essay suggests that On Message communication, illustrated by George W. Bush's administration, functions as a particular form of *prosopopoeia*, the verbal equivalent to wearing masks. The project charts the variable relationship between political authority and performance to suggest that On Message communication refigures the classical account of *prosopopoeia* and alters the relationship between publics and political authority.

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*And it's hard to imagine that the world could possibly have gotten better with Saddam Hussein in power.*

Condoleezza Rice, 9/10/2006

*But the fact is, the world is much better off today with Saddam Hussein out of power.*

Dick Cheney, 9/10/2006

*The world is safer because Saddam Hussein is no longer in power.*

George W. Bush, 9/11/2006

In the week leading up to the fifth anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks, the Bush administration ventured into the media landscape to comment on the progress of the wars on terror and in Iraq. As illustrated in the quotations above, the mobilisation of multiple officials resulted in a singular message from the Executive Branch. Confronted with numerous opportunities to reflect on the previous five years and project the course of administration policy, administration officials enacted the "open secret" of Bush administration public discourse: "Stay on message and say it often" (Ivie 2004a). On Message communication produces a discourse that can meet and defuse a variety of contingent calls for political speech, enabling any variety of individuals to speak on behalf of an institution in any number of places. Charles Walcott and Karen Hult (2003) suggest that staying on message produces an administration that resists transparency, appears unified, and maintains an aura of approachability.

On Message communication responds to the demands of any particular moment or audience with an impenetrable message marked and reinforced by its uniform performance. The resulting discourse resists treating the individual iteration of communication as a unique rhetorical performance and minimises the possibility of an unexpected, contingent outcome. The multiple iterations of the message suggest a democratic accessibility while the uniformity of the message resists allowing an audience a uniquely responsive rhetorical exchange. When used by the Executive Branch or other institutions of democratic authority, the strategy produces discourse with formative power over a public's relationship to democratic leadership. To the extent publics have access to democratic leadership through political communication, On Message communication impacts a public's ability to link discourse to individual positions of authority, and therefore shapes the conditions by which political authority might be held accountable by the people.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1988, 155) argues that the demands placed on political communication by the mediated political environment alter the style and substance of public discourse by abandoning a traditional conception of eloquence in favour of "synoptic moments" that offer memorable visual and verbal sentiments. These synoptic moments become repeated across the complex of political power and result in On Message communication that replaces kairotic eloquence with redundant and inflexible "talking points." A preference for eloquence assumes that every instance of political communication is unique and filled with inventive potential, which may have once been the case when the opportunities for authority to address publics

were limited by material and political constraints. Jamieson's lamentation about eloquence privileges a notion of contingency wherein every utterance serves as a *particular* response to a *particular* political moment. With a broad range of news media outlets covering political issues every hour of the day, political communication becomes autotelic, a preponderance of speech for speech's sake.

These alterations in the understanding of political authority's relationship to the contingent rhetorical moment result from a contemporary political environment that presents "diverse, fragmented, and complex" communication channels that require shifts in "power relations among key message providers" (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 209). Put simply, a single politician cannot individually satiate the broad demands for speech, thereby necessitating an extension of authority to other speakers in order to supply the appropriate volume of authorised discourse. Publics expect sufficient authorised discourse because such discourse serves as the basic mechanism by which the people can hold political power accountable.

The On Message strategy creates a network of rhetorical performances across a variety of discursive platforms in an effort to take advantage of and mitigate contemporary conditions of circulation and interpretation. An appreciation of these reconfigurations requires altering our critical perspective of political discourse from one that accounts for texts as fully formed and isolated moments of political expression and toward one that embraces the atomisation and recirculation of political sound bites and attempts to map political authority according to the variety of officials and contingencies presented and effaced in the process of staying on message. On Message communication serves as, on the one hand, an opportunity to examine how one kind of contemporary discursive practice encourages an evolving sense of – perhaps even a retro-fitting of – some key rhetorical categories. On the other hand, On Message communication also serves as a very particular rhetorical practice that constitutes a rhetorical relationship between political authority and the people, and – within democratic institutions, at least – fundamentally alters the ways publics understand and account for political authority.

Because On Message communication repeats a message in a variety of places, the relationship between the inventional moment and the contingent moment of expression becomes both tenuous and explicitly marked. The resistance to contingent rhetorical opportunities depends on reducing discourse to Jamieson's synoptic moments *and* reproducing those moments via numerous spokespeople. As such, the possibility of accounting for a discourse by way of its contingent speaker becomes a more laborious exercise (see Black 1998). While we might view this difficulty as a condition of Roland Barthes' (2001) declaration of the death of the author and the subsequent empowerment of the reader, such a conclusion denies the possible value in linking a discourse to its origin. For political discourse, the evisceration of the link between speech and speaker represents the suppression of the ethical register of public discourse, and as such, allows political authority to constitute a very particular mechanism of accountability. In the case of On Message discourse, the mechanism of accountability depends on carefully negotiating the relationships between a discourse's authorisation, its speaker, and its contingent encounter with a public. What follows is an effort to track those relationships by articulating a concept of authority in relation to its discursive variant, *ethos*, and considering how an updating of the classical rhetorical concept of *prosopopeia* – the wearing of

masks, speaking in the voice of someone or something not present in the contingent moment of speaking – might reveal how On Message communication constructs a discursive environment that muddles the question of accountability.

Paul de Man explains *prosopopoeia* as the process by which a disembodied author appears localisable through performance. “Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poiēn*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)” (de Man 1984, 75-76). *Prosopopoeia* plots the relationship between voice and mask, authority and speaker, and as such serves as the best critical apparatus for reading the discourse of disembodied authority. A continued engagement with Bush administration discourse surrounding the fifth anniversary of the September 11th attacks will help illustrate one process by which we might recuperate rhetorical figures for contemporary rhetorical environments. Considering the gap between authority and discourse produced via On Message communication may not empower publics to render authority democratically accountable, but such an investigation will at least illustrate how discursive strategies construct a public’s imagination of political accountability.

### Authority, Accountability, and Shifting Contingencies

President Barack Obama’s first Executive Order in many ways serves as a response to and verification of a public demand for political accountability. Signed one day after his inauguration, the order revoked the previous administration’s interpretation of executive privilege and thereby revised the protocols of Presidential transparency that inform a notion of Executive accountability (Obama 2009a). The order illustrates that political authority – and subsequently accountability – depends upon the discursive practices that present authority before the people. Obama’s approach to executive privilege rejects Bush’s executive order 13233, which depended on two significant characteristics of privilege framing the accountability of the Executive Branch. First, the order creates a relatively equal level of privilege for both the incumbent and former presidents. Second, when incumbent and former presidents disagree on whether to release past records or not, the document defaults to the refusal of access (Executive Order 13233, 2001).

Bush’s order interprets executive privilege as a timeless defense against transparency and imagines the presidency as an authority that extends beyond any particular individual.<sup>1</sup> Such an interpretation affirms Herbert Marcuse’s (2008, 18) description of political authority in which a “separation of office and person is only an expression for the autonomisation (*Verselbständigung*) and reification of authority freed from its bearer.” On Message communication, easily considered a mode of disciplining the unruly contemporary rhetorical environment, may on closer inspection represent the preeminent strategy for developing and sustaining this brand of disembodied authority before contemporary publics, which monitor political power via numerous forms and flows of public discourse. As such, the influence of On Message communication on notions of authority and accountability is most acute in representative and democratic political formations. In these formations, authority – understood as derived from and accountable to the people – produces a discourse that simultaneously appears accountable (in that it appears before the people) and obscures the relationship between authority and the people.

The possibilities of accountability may seem grim in the face of Marcuse’s



historical account of authority as long-ago disembodied and in light of Michael Warner's (2005, 165) assertion that the kinds of personal abstraction that mark public discourse tend to be exclusively available to individuals in positions of power. Authority, according to Marcuse and Warner, has historically insulated itself from questions of accountability in order to perpetuate order and control. Robert L. Ivie (2004b) articulates this kind of insulation as a prominent myth in the American political imagination that neutralises the rhetorical possibilities of public dissent. He argues that "we might better grasp how constructing appropriately flexible boundaries of intersecting attitudes and attributes rather than rigid and exclusive categorical distinctions of identity and difference enables dissent to perform the crucial function of holding delimited perspectives accountable to one another," a performance that requires an appreciation for the "interface of democracy and rhetoric" (Ivie 2004b, 24). On Message communication not only operates by way of such an interface, it also uniquely constitutes the interface in such a way that it does not necessarily preclude the possibilities of dissent, but instead creates a chasm between a people and political authority.

As On Message communication produces a discourse resistant to the contingent moment of address and foregrounds a gap between speaker and authority it also relies on a particular speaker in a particular moment to give voice to the message. This account of the message as both institutionally stable and performatively particular takes advantage of a rhetorical presumption of embodied singularity by which "we cannot of course imagine a speech except as the speech of a person" (Quintilian trans. 2001, Book 9.2.32). On Message communication performs a distance between the locus of the speaker and locus of authority, which produces an anxiety because "on the one hand, no one seems to be in charge and, on the other, that someone might be in charge in a hidden way" (Salecl 2004, 121). Beyond producing public anxiety about leadership, On Message communication disrupts the representational relationship between democratic authority and publics by veiling the identity and localisability of authority.<sup>2</sup> On Message communication discloses a gap between speaker and authority and therefore calls into question, if it does not fully resist, the identifiability of authority and its representational relationship to the people.

Blumler and Kavanaugh (1999, 224) link the increase in venues demanding political communication to an expansion of authorised speakers and a pattern of redundancy throughout authorised political discourse. On Message communication represents the quintessential mode of communicating under these fragmented conditions and suggests an overt refusal on the part of authority to engage in the unique contingencies of any particular speaking opportunity. As speakers pay closer attention to the institutional precision of the message than to the particularity of the speaking occasion, authorised speakers present themselves as cogs in the machinery of political discourse, or so the various political humour programs on television would have us believe.

Many a laugh has come by way of pointing out the unoriginality of On Message communication by sequencing clips of Bush administration officials saying precisely the same thing. Robert Hariman (2008, 251) argues that political parody functions "to reveal limitations that others would want to keep hidden", but such a revelation results as much in confusion as illumination in this case. The laughs

hoped for in disclosing On Message redundancy depend on the assumption that authorial originality indicates political credibility, and that both are measured in moment of vocal performance. On Message communication resists the assumption that authorship and speaker are concurrent positions in the rhetorical enterprise. Further, On Message communication refuses to conceal that gap in its performance, explicitly trafficking in artifice and wholly ignoring Aristotle's advice that speakers construct messages that appear natural and hide the prefabrications of discourse (Aristotle trans. 1984, Book 3.2).

While political humorists aim to discredit political administrations by revealing the compulsive unoriginality of political spokespersons, their dismissal of On Message communication as inauthentic only accuses its practitioners of something they have already admitted to in the performance. Further, such a dismissal mistakenly confuses the identification of the artifice of On Message communication as the kind of disclosure of political limitations Hariman values in his political humour. The identification of artifice states a truth, but not the whole truth of On Message communication. Questions of originality presume one can draw critical conclusions about authority and character by way of individual speakers. The On Message strategy takes advantage of that rhetorical privileging of an original and contiguous relationship between the locus of authority and the locus of speaker in order to reshape the relationship between authority and the people.

The assumption that authority and invention admit of some contiguity depends on conflating the notion of authority and the notion of authorship. That is to say, there is a preference for collapsing the rhetorical performer with the rhetorical inventor, ignoring alternate accounts of authority in rhetorical production. Authority, according to Quintilian (trans. 2001), functions not as a force that imbues a speaker with power or as a sign of proprietary ownership of content, but instead as an external proof brought to bear on the contingent concerns of the rhetorical encounter (Book 5.11.36-38). In contrast to the external resource of authority, the particular speaker gains authorising force only to the extent that the crafted speech demonstrates a sufficiently persuasive ethos. In his translation of Aristotle's treatment of ethos, George Kennedy (1991, 38) suggests that "Aristotle thus does not include in rhetorical ethos the authority that a speaker may possess due to his position in government or society... One practical reason for stressing character as revealed within the speech was that Greek law required defendants to speak on their own behalf, and they were often lacking in external authority". Understanding ethos as internal to the moment of speaking depends upon an understanding of the contingent moment of speaking as an authorising force itself.

The classically figured difference between authority and ethos rests on the relationship between an authorised voice and the contingent moment of speaking; authority represents a kind of portable and inalienable force of character while ethos represents a force of character negotiated and adjusted within a particular rhetorical encounter. On Message communication complicates the distinction between authority and ethos by performing a message that minimises the capacity for a speaker to demonstrate or construct a rhetorical ethos. Craig Smith (2004) suggests that "speakers are persuasive through *ethos* by demonstrating character through choice. That is, *ethos* reveals the speaker's habit when it comes to making decisions; the speaker's history of decision making is a history of individual enact-

ment. In this way, *ethos* is an ontological structure that leaves a trail that reveals moral fiber and standing" (Smith 2004, 15).

One might conclude that staying on message abandons a concern for *ethos* on the part of the speaker, since staying on message is in fact a refusal to make contingent choices. However, the refusal to make contingent choices is itself a kind of choice. The speaker still participates in the rhetorical encounter, prompting the audience to evaluate the content of the inflexible message according to the contingent context of its expression. Debra Hawhee (2002, 31) asserts that "the *dunamis* of *logos*, like the bodily arts of pharmacology and athletic training, emerges in the encounter itself," subjecting the moment of expression and the locus of the speaker to contingent dynamics as perceived by an audience that encounters the message as a unique rhetorical moment. While speech presents itself as embodied and reveals choices that illuminate character, On Message communication suggests that those choices may not originate within the speaking body. As such, On Message communication admits of multiple contingencies: the contingency of the audience experiencing the rhetorical encounter and the contingency of authority attempting to manage the contingency of that audience.

While the contingent choices in the act of staying on message appear limited, the choice to stay on message also minimises the potential for authorised speakers to contradict similarly authorised speakers. W. Lance Bennett (2005, 172) notes that a politician's "spontaneous departures from well-honed scripts can become big and often negative news." Under this formulation, authority is concerned with the contingent afterlife of any single authorised speaker's discourse. The strategy no longer refuses to engage in the contingent moment, but is instead engaging a contingent moment that has yet to occur. J. Blake Scott (2006, 119) explains: "kairotic action can be based on the assessment of and attempt to opportunistically control or at least avoid or defend against risk. From this humanistic perspective, kairos, like risk assessment and forecasting, can be thought of as an attempt to colonise the future in a way that creates an advantage."

Scott's notion of indeterminate risk figures On Message communication as a security mechanism against the uncontrollable forces of circulation. This account connects On Message communication to the communication strategies in the corporate world that view redundancy and consistency as components of issue ownership, and so we might view On Message communication as an indicator of the corporate sensibilities of contemporary political organisation. May-May Meijer and Jan Kleinnijenhuis (2006) suggest that the extent to which an organisation successfully addresses issues is directly related to the level of trust publics have in the organisation. Staying consistent across a variety of speaking opportunities serves to control the discourse on issues and to elevate the reputation of institutional authority before the public. The result is a kind of institutional anaphora, a rhetorical device predicated on repetition of phrasings within a discourse, extended here to a repetition of talking points across communication events.

The quotations at the opening of this essay illustrate this process of repetition. Condoleezza Rice (2006) asserts, "It's hard to imagine that the world could possibly have gotten better with Saddam Hussein in power," Vice President Cheney (2006) reiterates, "the world is much better off today with Saddam Hussein in power," and President Bush (2006a) ultimately affirms the sentiment when he states "The

world is safer because Saddam Hussein is no longer in power.” The talking point allows the Executive Branch to speak univocally, minimising the potential for one authorised speaker to stand in contrast to others. In an age when mass media and even publics can recontextualise and circulate authorised discourses, such repetition serves both as a mode of reinforcement and as a defense against institutional inconsistency. But treating On Message communication as a form of anaphora fundamentally alters our understanding of authorised discourse because the figure appears only when we consider all the manifestations of the talking point. The discourse of authority stretches beyond a single speaking moment and the individuals authorised to speak in a single moment are not fully authorised to produce discourse that renders political authority accessible to the people. Salecl (2004) explains “there is no place for inconsistency, non-wholeness” (p. 121) when we substitute the virtuality of a disembodied authority with the virtuality of a momentary and partial authorisation of a speaker, and as such the embodied moment of speaking becomes deficient in rendering authority fully accessible to the people because its performance is predicated on artifice.

### Voices, Bodies, and Masks

As speakers no longer find their voices in the contingent moment or by way of being uniquely suited to an invitation, they instead function as a momentary metonymic substitution for some other authorial voice. The substitution allows authority to address publics while the momentary nature of the substitution allows for a speaker’s ethos to inflect the address with difference. This concept of authorial voice forces us to revisit Quintilian’s presumption about the localisability of speech, the isolation of voice within a body. On Message communication mobilises the particularity of embodied and “voiced” rhetorical practice to complicate the relationship between the body politic and its disembodied authority. An increasing interest in the sonic dimensions of rhetoric and in the bodily manifestations of discourse<sup>2</sup> offer up new ways of thinking through the affective and material conditions of receiving public discourse; in this case, we must consider how discursive practices utilise the privileged categories of voice and body to obscure formative constructions of democratic imagination. In On Message communication, voice must be understood sonically as the flourish of difference created by the proxy speaker *and* conceptually as the authorising force of the discourse.

The rhetorical tradition offers up an excellent device for explaining the relationship between a speaker and a disembodied voice: prosopopoeia. Aristotle (trans. 1984) explains the strategic value of prosopopoeia as a way to say things about oneself or others without appearing contradictory or abusive (Book 3.17.16). Quintilian (trans. 2001) suggests the figure’s value lies in simulating “the emotions of children, women, nations, and even things which cannot speak,” and which “are all entitled to their appropriate character” (Book 11.1.41). As such, On Message as prosopopoeia allows political authority to meet all the demands for authorised speech given the material impracticality of speaking everywhere at once. Like Quintilian’s treatment of prosopopoeia, On Message communication indicates an imbalance in the availability of the figure; only those authorised to speak can give voice to that which cannot. Unlike Quintilian’s account, On Message communication does not channel the displaced or excluded voices of the margins, but to the

strategically displaced locus of authority. Where Quintilian's prosopopoeia served as a (typically meager and co-opting) mechanism of representing the voiceless, On Message's prosopopoeia becomes a mechanism for strategically representing authority in a nebulous state of disembodied voices and un-voiced bodies.

Quintilian (trans. 2001) further explains prosopopoeia as a valuable exercise for young orators, who "rarely deliver their speeches as advocates, but generally as sons, parents, rich men, old men, the bad-tempered, the easy-going, misers, the superstitious, cowards or mockers; comic actors hardly have more roles to sustain in their performance than these men do in their speeches" (Book 3.8.51). Similarly, de Man (1984, 76) argues that *prosopopoeia* presents itself by way of "style and narrative diction" that results in "the art of delicate transition." But On Message prosopopoeia lacks both the adaptive and stylised dimensions; the message is not crafted to suit the spokesperson or moment but instead to minimise message difference among spokespeople. The spokesperson performs the message not as an inventive invocation of an external and authorial voice but as a premeditated act that evacuates the inventional moment of prosopopoeia from the moment of performance, wholly – not partially – evacuating the speaker's own voice with the voice of authority. If prosopopoeia represents a kind of *energeia* that makes an excluded voice sonically appear within a discourse, the ability to appreciate that appearance depends on an ability to identify the difference in voices, to identify the authorial origins of the voices.

Hoping for a precise origin assumes prosopopoeia operates as a citational strategy, a quotation marked by vocal performance. Jacques Derrida (1988, 12) notes that in some ways, all language "can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable." However, On Message communication exists at least in part to resist this recontextualising possibility of language. Whereas in the classical account of prosopopoeia a speaker would invoke a voice from beyond the contingent moment, thereby figurally "wearing the mask" of another, On Message communication places a speaker before an audience who singularly speaks the voice of authority. The mask worn in On Message communication is not the mask of authority; rather, the disembodied voice of authority wears the mask of the spokesperson.

The metaphor of voice as clothing underscores the propensity for confusing body and voice, since, de Man (1984, 79) explains, "incarnate flesh and clothing have at least one property in common, in opposition to the thoughts they both represent, namely their visibility, their accessibility to the senses." The embodied performance of On Message communication leads to a contingent experience of authorised discourse which allows the speaker's ethos to momentarily figure disembodied authority. When de Man explains autobiography as a kind of prosopopoeia that allows others to place themselves in another's narrative, he asserts that the question of authorship concerns itself not with the epistemic accuracy of the narrative but instead merely with the capacity for the author to sanction the discourse (p. 71). In On Message communication the spokesperson does not serve as an authorial origin, but instead as an authorised intermediary between authority and a people.

Despite its implicit distinction between disembodied authority and individual speaker, the discourse presents itself as something unique, predicated on what

de Man, himself channeling Wordsworth, calls the “tender fiction” that the voice spoken by prosopopoeia and the speaker are somehow united (p. 77). On Message communication functions as a politics of style, a way of strategically dressing authority in a visible fiction of difference. The uncertainty about the locus of authority is reinforced by these visible differences in the performance: at one point Condoleezza Rice, at another point Donald Rumsfeld, and to the extent President Bush intones the same message, even the body that occupies the singular and institutional office of authority is rendered as a mask for the disembodied voice of authority. Where once prosopopoeia served to create a plurality of voices in an exclusive space, this contemporary prosopopoeia functions to make an exclusive voice appear diverse and multifaceted.

For On Message communication to work as a stylising strategy, individual speakers must at times speak in their own voices in order to plausibly demonstrate how the artifice of the message is imbued with difference. For instance, while Vice President Cheney channels the voice of authority when he answers questions on Iraq and the War on Terror during his September 10, 2006 *Meet the Press* interview, he must go “off script” when asked about events or issues unique to Cheney, such as accidentally shooting his hunting partner. Topics related to the authorised speaker, and yet not to authority itself, imbue On Message discourse with difference and also insulate authority from audiences as the spokesperson appears unaltered in the transition between prefabricated talking points and the contingent topics that arise. Cheney’s response to Tim Russert’s question about intelligence operative Valerie Plame further illustrates this delicate performance of authority and difference. When Cheney asserts that he has “the authority... to classify and declassify information,” Russert asks: “Could you declassify Valerie Plame’s status as an operative?” Like the hunting incident, the topic uniquely suits Cheney. Unlike the accidental shooting, the topic implicates the machinations of authority within the Executive Branch. In an effort to carefully negotiate the situation as a function of his own ethos and a figuration of an authority beyond his person, Cheney refuses to speak at all. In the case of Valerie Plame, Cheney’s embodied presence threatens to collapse the distance between authority and speaker and create a localisable position of authority.

The alternation between voices illustrated by Cheney indicates that the stylising of authority by way of prosopopoeia has the capacity to threaten the strategic distance between authority and publics. However, On Message communication can also turn such threatening moments into moments of opportunity. On Message communication creates the possibility of momentarily localising authority in an effort to create a mask that might stand accountable. In the case of the Bush administration, this mask was Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld may be accountable to the extent he took part in the performance of authority, but the prosopopoeia of On Message communication forces us to acknowledge that Rumsfeld’s November 6, 2006 resignation is not tantamount to holding the voice of authority accountable. In fact, the possibility of accountability develops according to the dictates of disembodied authority, not by way of increased participation on the part of the people. If Cheney’s interview illustrates how authority uses the performative difference of prosopopoeia to suggest diversity in the face of inflexible singularity, the Rumsfeld resignation reveals On Message communication to be the political

equivalent of Stuart Ewen's (1999, 270) consumer stylistics: "instead of social change, there is image change. Brief shows of flexibility at the surface mask intransigence to the core."

## The Effacement of the Political

We might conclude that On Message communication presents certain democratic problems to the extent it is understood as a masking of authority, but to the extent that prosopopoeia "designates the very process of figuration as giving face to what is devoid of it" (de Man 1996, 24), the strategy may represent the only way in which we can access and know authority. Staying on message serves to mobilise authority in a world where "The dignity of the office and the worthiness of the officiating person no longer coincide in principle. The office retains its unconditional authority, even if the officiating person does not deserve authority. From the other side, as seen by those subject to authority, in principle every 'under-person' is equal as a person to every 'over-person'" (Marcuse 2008, 16-17). The substitutability of spokespersons in On Message communication represents a mode of sanctioning message distribution that implies "an alignment between two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (de Man 1984, 70).

If Marcuse and de Man are correct about the substitutive logic of authority, a concern for accountability must focus primarily on the ways in which a people are figured as both possible proxies for authority and wholly incapable of identifying an authority that authorises beyond the space of substitutability. Salecl (2004) suggests that

*Where in the past, a politician would have hidden the fact that it is not he who writes the speech, today, this very revelation is used as a campaign advertisement. The message that this advertisement puts across is: we show you the truth, the politician is just an ordinary man like you, and he is very honest, since he even shows you how he is not even writing his own speeches, etc. (Salecl 2004, 41-42).*

Salecl's illustration reinforces the two crucial dynamics of the shared logic of On Message communication and disembodied authority: a dislocation of the authorial force of speech from the speaker and a presumed relative equality of potential speakers and audience members that imagines a limitless substitution of masks.

The implicit possibility of representative substitution and simultaneous distancing of authority from the people reveals On Message communication as a mode of deferral to a future contingent moment. Thus, there is a kind of preparatory nature to On Message communication, as evidenced by the following Bush Administration message:

*President Bush (2006b): For example, Zubaydah disclosed Khalid Sheikh Mohammed – or KSM – was the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks.*

*Vice President Cheney (2006): The information we've collected from the detainees and people like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11, has probably been some of the most valuable intelligence we've had in the last five years.*

*President Bush (2006a): We put al Qaeda on the run, and killed or captured most of those who planned the 9/11 attacks, including the man believed to be the mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.*

This series of talking points serves to introduce Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) as a *topos* for explaining the effectiveness of the War on Terror. On its face, the Bush speech on September 6, 2006 seems to abide by a typically contingent speaking situation, since Bush was detailing the administration's policy on torture, detainees, and intelligence-gathering in response to growing criticism about those policies. But once KSM comes up in Cheney's interview and again in Bush's address to the nation, the contingent moments that invited the above utterances were also smaller parts in the machinery of On Message communication concerned with a future moment. Therefore, the KSM talking point may serve to familiarise audiences with the "9/11 mastermind" so that the particular argument resonates with the audience via sheer repetition.

As a result of repetition across particular speaking moments, Bush's comments on September 6, 2006, come from a voice that will also speak five days later, a voice perpetually preparing for a future contingency. In being preparatory, On Message communication is also evacuating, rendering the body of the President mute as his voice is displaced with the disembodied voice of authority that precedes and follows Bush's embodied moments of speaking. On Message communication that responds to a rather empty demand for speech has the effect of emptying out the authority of the immediate speaker, which in turn empties the audience of agency in the contingent moment. Not surprisingly, de Man (1984, 75-76) links prosopopeia closely to the rhetorical device of apostrophe – addressing a separate audience than the one assumed in the discourse, "an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply." The audience Bush speaks to on September 6, 2006, and Cheney on September 10, 2006, is not merely, or perhaps primarily, the audience on those dates, but the audience that will be listening to Bush (that is to say, seeing Bush and hearing the disembodied voice of authority) on September 11, 2006. de Man's invocation of apostrophe reveals that, to the extent the voice of authority is disembodied, the audience addressed by prosopopeia must imagine themselves in a similarly disembodied space in order to access and reflexively understand the characteristics of authority. The process by which On Message communication defers to a future contingency is also the process by which the capacity for the people to practically articulate their relationship to authority as a contemporary political arrangement is rendered impossible.

The preparatory maneuver of On Message communication reveals that the short term benefit of the strategy – stylising authority, reinforcing concepts – also displaces the authority of the audience to receive a message and make contemporary judgments about the discourse and the authority that produces it. Prosopopeia and On Message communication ultimately operate on a principle of effacement, the same principle that informs Marcuse's disembodied authority. The masks are not effaced but they are not perpetually animated by the voice of authority. When the masks fail to present the voice of authority, authority exists as faceless, which results in a similarly effaced public. This double effacement most directly impacts a people's capacity to imagine their relationship to authority, and is best illustrated by one of the more recognisable talking points of the Bush administration's



On Message strategy:

*Donald Rumsfeld (2006): So, I'm confident that over time they will evaluate and reflect on what's happening in this struggle and come to wise conclusions about it.*

*President Bush (2006c): If we ignore the hopes and aspirations of the Iraqi people, we will have failed when history looks back.*

*Vice President Cheney (2006): But I also think when we look back on this period of time 10 years from now...that 2005 will have been a turning point.*

*Condoleezza Rice (2006): History will have to judge.*

The disembodied voice that authorises each particular speaker in On Message communication addresses an audience not physically and temporally present, thereby displacing, at least in the moment of message expression, questions about the legitimacy and accountability of authority. Such an apostrophe enacts a radical projection of contingency significantly different than Scott's (2006) colonisation of an indeterminate future. In this example, the Bush administration is not attempting to shape how history will judge, but is instead authorising a space of accountability that forces the audience to defer judgment. The concept of apostrophe, the effacement of the audience, and the Bush administration's reference to a future sense of history may seem exceptionally convenient for a project on prosopopoeia. However, this example of On Message communication brings into stark relief how the short term strategy of resisting the immediate contingency of a discursive opportunity via redundant talking points also creates long term challenges for positing a space of public judgment, a space de Man recognised as displaced in the figure of apostrophe.

To engage authority, the audience must assume a position of substitutability with authority, and to the extent that authority is nonlocalisable, so too is the audience authorised to hold political authority accountable. De Man (1984, 78) describes this radical effacement as "the latent threat that inhabits prosopopoeia, namely, that by making death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death" (p. 78). Lorna Clymer (1995, 362) argues that de Man overstates the dangers of prosopopoeia and offers an "intersubjective" treatment of the symmetrical substitutability of the figure in which "the living are struck momentarily motionless but seldom dumb" and as such describes prosopopoeia as "a both/and situation rather than the either/or condition" suggested by de Man. Clymer's approach certainly seems more hopeful, encouraging us to assume that the potential substitutability of spokespersons also implies the potential embodiment of authority. Marcuse (2008, 26) suggests that, in regard to political authorities, the "decisions regarding their rightness or wrongness are made exclusively within their own order, among themselves." The democratic promise of substitutability implied by prosopopoeia might make authority accessible to the audience, but only to the extent that the audience is effaced in the substitution, placed in the same disembodied position as authority. Under this process, the people can hold authority accountable, but only in a space distinctly other, effaced, and deferred from the realm of public political imagination.

On Message communication serves as strategic defence against circulation, as a politics of style, and as mode of deferring questions of accountability. In each capacity, On Message communication mediates authority to publics by way of particular speaking bodies. The privileging of embodied discourse permeates our understanding of public discourse, and we must take care to appreciate how shifting modes of discursive production and circulation refigure our rhetorical vocabulary. In the case of *prosopopoeia*, the contemporary rhetorical environment produces a series of reversals that refigure the original relationship between mask and voice. The locus of authority and the locus of the speaker differentiate themselves within the On Message strategy by way of a distinction between the future-oriented contingency of institutional authority and the immediate contingency of a particular performance. Such a distinction forces us to acknowledge the rift between the authorising force of discourse and the character authorised to perform that discourse.

Michael Hyde (2004, xiii) suggests that “the *ethos* of rhetoric directs one’s attention to the ‘architectural’ function of the art: how, for example, its practice grants such *living room* to our lives that we might feel more *at home* with others and our surroundings.” To extend Hyde’s architectural metaphor, the choices that construct the living room of our political imaginations are often made beyond the singular speaker and moment. Instead, the apparent *ethoi* attached to the embodied moments become the stylistic flourishes that decorate the space in which we imagine ourselves in relation to authority. That is to say, a people’s relationship to authority is informed by both institutional protocols and the discursive interactions between bodies; changes in either component have the capacity to alter our understanding of the other.

The difference suggested by the various moments of authorial embodiment offered in On Message communication are differences in style, not content, demonstrating an authority that appears present and diverse before the people when it substantively remains inflexible and unapproachable. This tension between appearance and reality represents a shift in strategies for managing democratic dissent. Where Ivie (2004b, 20) discusses the ways political authority renders democracy and dissent in opposition, On Message communication allows dissent to operate in an apparent engagement with an authority it cannot locate. Under Ivie’s account of contemporary dissent, weak democracies tolerate dissenting discourse until it become necessary to overtly curtail dissenting ideas (p. 25). Via On Message strategies, dissent no longer requires censoring or containment, since the authorised discourses prevent dissent from finding its target.

As On Message communication constructs a political order replete with a copia of masks, the ability to remove the mask and know the face of authority becomes impossible. The relationship between disembodied authority and embodied *ethos* implies an *ethos* that functions as affective figure more than internal proof, a stylistic device more than a mode of ethical demonstration, and limits a public’s capacity to produce ethical judgments about speakers and authority. As such, On Message discourse produces a communication environment that appears deliberative and accessible, but mobilises the identities of authority in an effort to evade the challenges of dissenting publics. In other words, the mechanisms by which authority mobilises itself in public spheres shape the capacities of dissenting publics to critique authority. Dissent can exist, be expressed, and critique the appearance of

authority, but remains constrained in its capacities to locate its challenges before localised, identifiable, and actual authority.

While *On Message* communication operates by way of a doubling of contingency, the future contingency of disembodied authority can only be invoked in the presence of a relatively weak contemporary contingency. Thus, a consideration of democratic dissent must consider both Ivie's sense of weak democracy (2004b, 25) and a notion of weak contingencies. *On Message* communication succeeds to the extent that media outlets create a somewhat empty – and predictable – demand for discourse that underfunds the contemporary audience's capacity to make judgments. I do not mean to suggest that there is some kind of media complicity at play in the *On Message* strategy (not that there couldn't be). Instead, I believe that accounts of public discourse must acknowledge how changes in communication production, reproduction, and circulation alter the dynamics of contingency that fund the conditions of possibility for public judgment by articulating the relationship between authority and embodied character in particular ways.

In his inaugural address, President Barak Obama (2009b) declared "a new era of responsibility – a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, or nation and the world." Obama's call for responsibility and his first presidential action indicate a possible discursive space for the idea of responsibility, understood here as more than duties and obligation but also as a criterion for accountability. The failed nomination of Tom Daschle for secretary of health and human services illustrates one moment when the distance between authority and embodied speaker collapsed. "I've got to own up to my mistake" Obama (2009c) asserted. "Ultimately, it's important for this administration to send a message that there aren't two sets of rules ... one for prominent people and one for ordinary folks who have to pay their taxes." In refusing two sets of rules, Obama is also re-mapping (though not necessarily refusing) the disembodied space of accountability mapped out in this essay. Obama localises the space of authority squarely, in this instance, within his office and person. This localisation meets Ivie's imperative for a politics that engages in and manages antagonisms rather than eliminate them by force or suppression (Ivie 2004b, 21). However, Ivie predicates managing antagonism on "a fluid condition of consubstantial rivalry." Unfortunately, politically authorised discourse constructs various channels and obstacles of fluid consubstantiality, and thereby controls the very ways in which publics understand the possibilities of such consubstantiality.

Paying attention to the particularity of embodied speech comes with the burden of presuming the whole of rhetorical practice is contained within a network of identifiable and substitutable individuals. In many ways, democracies depend upon the fiction of substitutability as a consubstantial mode of deliberation. Democratic authority and publics must struggle with the paradox of consubstantiality: on the one hand, all individuals can be substituted in the office of authority and, on the other hand, authority constructs the discursive mechanisms by which we encounter and imagine authority in its substitutability. Obama may craft a localised space of accountability, but such a space is only one possible iteration of political authority.

Any effort to construct a discourse of dissent must come, given its responsive and deliberative nature, following a rhetorical construction of authority. Such a construc-

tion makes use of the flexible categories of political power, discursive bodies, and ever-changing modes of rhetorical production and circulation. The challenge, for democratic authority and dissent, alike, rests in identifying how rhetorical strategies privilege particular modes of discursive behaviour that can equally be used for and against the best interests of strong democracies by constructing the very ways we come to identify political authority, the place of dissenting discourse, and the grounds upon which we can understand those entities as accountable. Publics may claim a pound of flesh in retaliation for flawed discourse, but they will also fail to address the more significant dilemma of being related to authority in ways that shape their own political possibilities.

## Notes:

1. This project articulates voice, with origins in the spokesperson but not necessarily the author, as a resource for rhetorical differentiation that can be strategically mobilised precisely because of an audience's tendency to conflate voice, body and subject. For alternate treatments of sonic accounts of rhetoric see Gunn 2007; Gunn and Hall 2008.
2. Such calls for accountability, to the extent they mark a legitimation crisis for authority, can either be temporarily resisted by insisting upon a distinction between authority and the people (which is, of course, not sustainable in democratic arrangements) or by allowing the people to participate in processes that resolve the crisis (Habermas 1975). In the case of On Message strategy, holding one mask up before the people as accountable splits the difference, in that it allows people to hold something accountable, but that something is determined by the institutional authority.

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# JOURNALISM, DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

NORMATIVE ARGUMENTS  
FROM PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY

PHIL RAMSEY

## Abstract

This article addresses theories of deliberative democracy, the public sphere and government communication, and investigates the ways in which government communication might be carried out to strengthen and improve deliberative democracy, within the wider context of journalism. The article begins by undertaking an extended survey of the normative model of the public sphere, as outlined by Jürgen Habermas, and takes account of his later work on the centrality of the deliberative process to the public sphere. In the second half, the article applies Held's conceptions of the role of government communication in the strengthening of deliberative democracy, and attempts to make normative arguments about certain forms of government communication. In doing so, it addresses three areas: the problems with the standing "lobby" system of briefing journalists in the UK; ways in which government communication might be held to greater account in the public sphere; ways in which the improved communication of Parliament might impact upon deliberative democracy.

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## Introduction

The term “deliberative democracy” was first used in 1980 by Joseph Bessette, following the “theoretical critique of liberal democracy and revival of participatory politics gradually developed through the 1970s” (Bohman and Rehg 1997, xii). Despite research on deliberative democracy *per se* being a relatively recent phenomenon, a large body of work has developed in a short space of time. In particular, Dahlgren holds to what we might call the central account of deliberative democracy, arguing that in a debate the “reasons should be made accessible to all concerned; this means not only that they should in some manner be made public, but also be comprehensible” (2009, 87). However, despite so many clear benefits to the model of deliberative democracy, Dahlgren identifies some problems, not wanting to “overload the role we expect deliberation to play in the public sphere” (2009, 88). Bohman and Rehg understand deliberative democracy as being evocative of “rational legislation, participatory politics, and civic self-governance” (1997, ix). Writing individually, Bohman maintains the position that deliberative democracy is a normative conception, to be governed by a set of clear principles: “Deliberation is democratic, to the extent that it is based on a process of reaching reasoned agreement among free and equal citizens. This conception of democratic deliberation also implies a normative ideal of political justification, according to which each citizen’s reasons must be given equal concern and consideration for a decision to be legitimate” (1997, 321). Bohman moves to outlining three models of Deliberative democracy, namely: *Pre commitment* (agreeing to “defined public agenda”); *Proceduralist* (which “avoids making overly strong and substantive assumptions about agreement among citizens”); *Dialogical* (in dialogue “many diverse capacities for deliberation are exercised jointly”) (1996, 25). Bohman argues that it is the latter model, based on deliberation with “whom we disagree and with others who are not literally present before us” that holds the most weight (1996, 24). Indeed, for Bohman deliberative democracy ought to be “interpersonal” between citizens who are “equally empowered and authorised to participate in decisions that affect their lives together” (1996, 25).

Cohen takes a normative approach in arguing that deliberative democracy involves “a framework of social and institutional conditions that facilitates free discussion among equal citizens – by providing favourable conditions for participation, association and expression” (1997a, 413). He also argues for a four-fold model that states deliberation should be (i) free, (ii) based on reason, (iii) equitable and (iv) have consensus as the overall outcome (1997b, 74). Similarly, Benhabib (1996) is concerned with the normative principles that ought to underpin deliberative democracy. For her, the legitimacy of democratic institutions increases as deliberation improves, stating that this occurs when “decisions are in principle open to appropriate public processes of deliberation by free and equal citizens” (1996, 69). Similarly, Young asserts that the manner in which deliberation occurs is fundamental to the very process of deliberative democracy itself. One of her main problems with much of deliberative democracy theory, is that “Deliberative theorists tend to assume that bracketing political and economic power is sufficient to make speakers equal” (1996, 122). However, she posits that many factors render this bracketing insufficient; economic dependence, political domination, sense of



the right to speak, valuation or devaluation of speech styles, are all factors which might hamper equality.

Like Cohen, Benhabib and Young, Fishkin (2009a) is also concerned with the theoretical underpinnings of deliberative democracy, arguing that people are ill informed, and it is hard to motivate people to become informed due to the problem of “rational ignorance.” However, Fishkin mobilises the concept through what he calls “deliberative polling” (1995, 2009a, 2009b), a process which results in a combination of “political equality with deliberation” (2009b, 26). This process pioneered by Fishkin himself, follows a simple plan. It involves bringing a large cross-section of a particular constituency together, polling the participants of a range of issues, allowing them to debate, discuss and draw on a range of experts. At the end of the process, the participants are polled again, on the same questions. Fishkin and his team, who partner with democratic civil society groups, have consistently found that views shift considerably following deliberative polling. In October 2007, Fishkin put “Europe in one room” (by bringing together a representative sample from across the EU), the results of which are discussed in *When the People Speak* (2009a, 183-189): he found that there was real commonality in the issues faced by people from all of Europe’s states, and increased understanding of the role of the EU. However, such exercises are inevitably expensive, with larger polls costing hundreds of thousands and indeed millions of pounds. However, the benefits to deliberative polling are clear, with Fishkin consistently finding large shifts of opinion from the before to the after. For example, he “found in a referendum in Australia and in a general election in Britain that when a scientific sample became more informed and really discussed the issues, it changed its voting intentions significantly” (2009a, 8).

## Theoretical Underpinnings: The Public Sphere

Whilst deliberative democracy as a term originates from 1980, its theoretical underpinnings can be derived from Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere (Habermas 1989; 1996; 1997). The very notion of improving the quality of democratic decision making based upon debate and consensus is foundational to the Habermasian project. Deliberative democracy can be considered an analogous category of what occurs in the public sphere. In a similar vein to the centre of the normative Habermasian model of the public sphere, “Deliberation can overcome the limitations of private views and enhance the quality of public decision-making for a number of reasons” (Held 2006, 237). Turning to Habermas’s model of the public sphere to frame this discussion provides the researcher with a rich intellectual well from which to make normative arguments. Under the terms that Habermas sets out, the public sphere is carved out between the state and the private sphere, and is a domain in which the public may hold the state to account through “rational-critical” debate. However, the public sphere in the UK and in most western mass democracies cannot be recognised according to the conditions by which Habermas lays down for it. Rather it is a poor reflection of the bourgeois model proposed by Habermas in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), an argument that he takes back up later in his later writing (1992, 1996, 2006, 2009). To this end, the public sphere is an *ideal*, rather than a *reality*. Like many other theorists, Manuel Castells (2008) argues for this position, insisting that there is normative value in

using the public sphere as a critical category (see also Garnham 1992; Scannell 2007). Referring to Habermas, Castells suggests “the terms of the political equation he proposed remain a useful intellectual construct – a way of representing the contradictory relationships between the conflictive interests of social actors, the social construction of cultural meaning, and the institutions of the state” (2008, 80).

Habermas argues that the main reasons for the break down in the ideal-type public sphere are the commercialisation of media and the dissipation of public discourse, a historical shift that he calls “refeudalisation” (1989). As media have become more commercialised, they have become more subservient to the market, and have become increasingly less committed to the stimulation of a public discourse. Rather commercialisation has led to an exponential rise in entertainment, and infomercial based content, at the expense of political journalism, current affairs journalism, and investigative reporting (Habermas 2006). Increasingly journalists attempt to understand politics through a lens of celebrity and personality, with party leaders in the UK clambering to be seen as “in touch” with the public. However, at the heart of a properly functioning public sphere is a press which stimulates debate, holds politicians and governments to account, and which functions to facilitate a flow of political information to the public. Based on this information, the public sphere functions as a site for the production of public opinion, which feeds back into the media system through polling, and which impact upon the state through voting.

Using the Habermasian theory of the public sphere to contextualise this article has a certain strong rationale to it, given Habermas’s later explicit focus on the role of deliberative democracy in the public sphere. Haas (1999) states that whilst Habermas is seen as one of the key proponents of deliberative democracy, he is accepted into this role somewhat uncritically; for example, in the case of Lambeth calling Habermas the “patron saint” of public journalism. Nevertheless, Habermas significantly informs the genre (Haas 1999, 346-347). Primarily, through the priority given to “deliberation” on political issues, of public value and importance, democratic differences are subject to reason and debate. Akin to how deliberation ought to operate in the Habermasian public sphere, it is through “through the force of better argument” and not through higher economic or social class, or dominance in terms of physical force, that citizens should gain influence (Edgar 2006, 124). The primacy of the theory of deliberative democracy, as constitutive of the Habermasian public sphere, is thus fundamental to its operation. This position is reinforced by Habermas in his some of his later work (2006, 2009).

Habermas suggests that a model of politics based on deliberation “is supposed to generate legitimacy through a procedure of opinion and will-formation that grants: publicity and transparency for the deliberative process; inclusion and equal opportunity for participation and a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes” (2006, 4). Such a deliberative process, he argues, is already built into the everyday forms of communication that we all undertake. In the course of every day, we listen to rational utterances, and weigh up their veracity; we are all interlocutors in the public sphere. On the question of deliberative democracy influencing the political process, Habermas states that this question is very much an empirical one. Drawing on research which shows that deliberation leads to more informed political choices, and less polarised viewpoints, he outlines the clear deliberative model in relation to the public sphere: “There is empirical evidence for an impact of delib-

eration on decision-making processes in national legislatures and in other political institutions as there is for the learning effects of ruminating political conversations among citizens in every-day life" (2006, 10).

To further develop the connection between deliberative democracy and journalism, I want to now address the role that Habermas sees for journalism in relation to the public sphere. Initially outlined and developed extensively in *Structural Transformation in the Public Sphere*, Habermas provides more rigorous and illustrative detail in his later work (1996, 2006). In one conception, Habermas posits that the public sphere is a fluid space: "Just as little does it represent a system; although it permits one to draw internal boundaries, outwardly it is characterised by open, permeable and shifting horizons" (1996, 360). These shifting horizons are in part directed and moved by journalists, who are mostly responsible for "wild flows of messages – news, reports, commentaries, talks, scenes and images, shows and movies with an informative, polemical, educational or entertaining content" (2006, 11-12). Having been fed (often highly mediated) positions on many subjects and issues from politicians, lobbyists, and civil society actors, journalists operating in the *media system*, "produce an elite discourse" (2006, 14-15). Despite much hyperbole surrounding the role of the Internet, Web 2.0 and citizen journalism, this article will proceed on the assertion that it is still the professional media system that holds the centre ground of the public sphere, an assertion that Habermas holds to.

These multiple actors then, with journalists in the media system making up the substantial core, "join in the construction of what we call 'public opinion,' though this singular phrase only refers to the prevailing one among many public opinions" (2006, 14-15). Indeed, in *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas submits to the by now prevailing position that public spheres, like public *opinions*, are multiple. He argues, "The streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of totally specified public opinions" (1996, 360).<sup>1</sup>

These public opinions, of course, are not static; rather, they are constantly changing, under the influence of "every-day talk in the informal settings or episodic publics of civil society at least as much as they are by paying attention to print or electronic media" (2006, 11-12). The latter part of this – the differing level of attention that is given to media – is fundamental for three reasons, and illustrative of my central argument. Firstly, the mediatisation of almost every level of society means that the public is largely saturated by media exposure; secondly, given the nature of the refeudalised public sphere, the opportunities for discussion of matters of a substantial political matter are limited, or at any rate, not utilised; thirdly, what opportunities interlocutors do have, are limited by the lack of quality or substantive political material to discuss, given the over-riding focus on "infotainment" and entertainment in most of the mainstream media.

With advanced market liberalisation in the media sector in the UK, few news outlets stand outside of the market. The most major exception is of course the BBC, whilst the *Guardian* newspaper which is operated by a not-for-profit trust, is an anomaly. Thus, according to normative public sphere theory, the ability of the public sphere to operate in the way it normatively *ought to*, is severely diminished. As media outlets have become more commercialised, and have become more subservient to market logic, they have become increasingly less committed

to the stimulation of a public discourse, and to the reporting of political matters of public importance. One of the major implications of this is that the reporting of government policy remains far from the type of detailed reporting that one might expect in a properly functioning public sphere. As governments become subject to diminishing levels of critical publicity, and serious in-depth political analysis, citizens have diminishing access to political information, upon which to base their political decisions. This chimes with John Thompson, who states that “the commercialisation of mass communication progressively destroyed its character as a medium of the public sphere, for the content of newspapers and other products was depoliticised, personalised and sensationalised” (1990, 113).

Writing some four and a half decades after he forwarded his theory of the public sphere, Habermas (2006) remains true to his primacy of the normative value of the public sphere. To Habermas, the contemporary public sphere is in flux. He argues that given the drive for profit that media corporations are subject to under market logic, serious political content that the public sphere requires is marginalised: “Issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment. Besides personalisation, the dramatisation of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarisation of conflicts promotes civic privatism and a mood of anti-politics” (2006, 26-27). To compound this situation further, public broadcasting – which does operate with a different logic – is being eroded; its loss, he argues, “would rob us of the centerpiece of deliberative politics” (2006, 27). That political public sphere that does remain, is “dominated by the kind of mediated communication that lacks the defining features of deliberation,” with a shortfall in “face-to-face interaction between present participants in a shared practice of collective decision-making” and the “lack of reciprocity between the roles of speakers and addressees in an egalitarian exchange of claims and opinions” (2006, 8-9).

## Normative Arguments from Deliberative Democracy Theory

In his analysis of deliberative democracy, Held takes account of the same shifts in the political process that Habermas takes account of in his “refeudalisation” thesis (Habermas, 1989). Held defines the key objective of deliberative democracy as “the transformation of private preferences via a process of deliberation into positions that can withstand public scrutiny and test” (Held 2006, 237). His conception of deliberative democracy is instructive here as he frames his conception in public sphere terms. In particular, he addresses the role of personality driven politics in a media saturated environment.

Referring to the growing instrumentalism of the political process, he argues: “The policy process has been invaded by opinion polling, focus groups and other marketing tools designed to adjust policy to extant views and interests rather than to explore the principles underpinning policy and to deliberate over policy direction” (2006, 234). Moreover, the public sphere is “undermined by the reliance of elites and parties on opinion poll data, which they are free to interpret and manipulate in their own interests” (2006, 234-235). Encompassing the refeudalisation thesis, we can chart the shift to a public sphere where the public opinion that it generates is harnessed for improved political positioning at the expense of policy development.

The strengthening of links to the spheres of advertising and marketing has become the most prevalent development here, and for a few decades now the influence of advertising executives in politics has been considerable (see Gould 1998).

Following Habermas's theory of the public sphere, Held provides specific normative arguments, which can be used as empirical criteria to determine the degree of effectual realisation of a system of deliberative democracy. According to Held,

- "Sharing information and pooling knowledge, public deliberation can transform individuals' understanding and enhance their grasp of complex problems" (2006, 237);
- "deliberation can expose one sidedness and partiality of certain viewpoints which may fail to represent the interests of the many" (2006, 237);
- "deliberation may enhance collective judgement because it is concerned not just with pooling information and exchanging views, but also with reasoning about these and testing arguments" (2006, 238).

On the first, Held suggests that the deliberative process leads to better informed individuals, where they "may come to understand elements of their situation which they had not appreciated before: for example, aspects of the interrelation of public issues, or some of the consequences of taking particular courses of action, intended or otherwise" (2006, 237). Through the process of sharing information and pooling knowledge, individuals become better placed to make informed, reasoned and rational decisions. On the second, Held suggests "public deliberation can reveal how certain preference formations may be linked to sectional interests" (2006, 237). Thus, deliberative democracy is grounded in the notion that democracy ought to benefit the many, not the few. In this sense, it can be called *egalitarian*, in a similar way that the normative Habermasian public sphere is in principle open to all (Habermas 1997, 105). On the third, arguing for deliberative democracy leads proponents of the theory to "hope to strengthen the legitimacy of democratic procedures and institutions by embracing deliberative elements, elements designed to expand the quality of democratic life and enhance democratic outcomes" (2006, 238). Thus, research on deliberative democracy ought to try to identify where these improvements might be made.

These three points could be conceived of as conditions of deliberative democracy that journalism can help to enable, contingent on a certain type of government communication. On each point, I will recommend how government communication – primarily to journalists – might help bring about these conditions. I will turn to each of Held's points, and will recommend how on the part of government, as they communicate to journalists, the strengthening deliberative democracy might be improved. In one sense, government cannot be responsible in real terms for what is reported. This is a point that Habermas suggests, arguing "even governments do not generally have any control over how the media convey and interpret their messages, or even how political elites or the broader public receive and react to them" (2009, 170). However, government can be responsible at least for the communication that emanates from the various organs of the state, and can ensure that communication is carried out in a way that is conducive to deliberative democracy. In this respect, I will refer to government communication from its central departments, and in the third point, refer to the communication of Parliament, on the

basis that in the UK system it is government that can have massive influence over the affairs of the legislature.

## Public Deliberation and Individuals' Understanding of Complex Problems

With regard to government communication, public deliberation on the affairs of government is a central part of deliberative democracy, and an important underpinning factor of the public sphere. For deliberation to function successfully, the type of communication that comes from government will be formative upon the process. The main way that government shares information and pools knowledge with the public, is through communication that it has with journalists. In the UK, this primarily happens through "the Lobby," the privileged group of journalists that meets with the Prime Minister's Spokesperson twice daily (during the Parliamentary sessions). In 2008 there were 176 members, mostly working for the national broadcast media and newspapers (HL Paper 7 2009, 21). Many smaller news outlets and regional journalists are excluded. The meeting of the lobby is now constitutes an attributable briefing (changed from the previous unattributable policy), but the only access the public and non-lobby journalists have to the proceedings comes in the form of a brief summary posted on the Number Ten website. The Phillis Review in 2004 had reported that "Both government and the media have seen their credibility damaged by the impression that they are involved in a closed, secretive and opaque insider process" (2004, 25). It is perhaps the presence and role of the lobby that probably best underpins this impression. The Lords Communication Report (2009) on Government communication suggested that the standing lobby system of privileging information to certain journalists in a segregated manner, should be abandoned, and that instead media briefings should be available to all online (HL Paper 7 2009, 22).

However, despite this clear recommendation, the lobby system has remained in place. In its response to the report, the government argued:

*The role of the Prime Minister's Spokesperson is fundamentally different to that of the President's spokesperson in the United States where a named and filmed spokesperson is filmed and can handle political questions. The Prime Minister's Spokesperson is a career civil servant who cannot handle political questions. His role is to inform and update the lobby on Government business. (HM Government, 2009)*

Whilst there are fundamental differences between the two political systems, concessions ought to be made by the UK government if the system of secrecy is to be abolished. Indeed, the rationale provided for not allowing a civil servant to handle political questions involves evoking a false dichotomy between political and non-political subject matter. To suggest that the Prime Minister's Spokesperson is ever answering questions on the business of government, in a manner devoid of political content, seems a contradiction in terms. Rather, enacting the recommendation to abolish the lobby system may lead to the development and improvement of deliberative democracy. Rather than government information being primarily communicated to an exclusive group of journalists, it could be placed firmly in the public domain. Rather than journalists have a premium on what they report

regarding government, and rather than them having predominance over the way the affairs of government are interpreted, the public would have much wider and better access to government communication.

## Deliberation against One-sidedness and Partiality

In respect of government communication, for one sidedness and partiality of certain viewpoints to be exposed, interlocutors need to be able to rely on factually correct information from government on which to base their deliberations. Whilst information coming from government will only form a part of deliberation within the wider public sphere, a certain type of government information will go a long way to improving deliberation within a public sphere. The obvious implication here is that government ought to thus only communicate in a way that is truthful and accurate. As an *aspiration* this is normatively desirable under the terms of the public sphere; as a *reality* this is practically very difficult to implement, nigh impossible. However, as this article has adopted a methodological framework of normative theory, the underpinning rationale of deliberative democracy, it is beneficial to theorise as to how government might be institutionally required to communicate in an honest and factual manner. Government ought to be absolutely clear and honest about its policies, including who they benefit and who they disadvantage. Discarding spin for positive presentation, welds the government to a manner of communicating which may help restore credibility in government communications, and may help restore the breakdown in trust between politicians, the media and the public. "Honesty" – in relation to government communication – could be seen as improbable concept. However, here I am referring not to subjective notions of honesty, but those which may come from institutional rigour and regulation.

Moving government along a continuum, towards some sense of honesty, may be possible under certain conditions. Turning to the House of Lords report again, it set out a normative standard of how governments ought to communicate, stating: "One of the most important tasks of government is to provide clear, truthful and factual information to citizens. The accurate and impartial communication of information about government polices, activities and services is critical to the democratic process" (HL Paper 7 2009, 7). The regulation of government to ensure that "spinning" information is avoided may be achieved by various forms of regulation, where the establishment of the UK Statistics Authority is perhaps a key example of how this may be achieved. The UK SA, established in April 2008, "is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament [...] The Authority's statutory objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and ensure good practice in relation to official statistics" (UK Statistics Authority, 2009). In order to achieve further structural impartiality, and to emphasise it's "arms-length" status, the "budget has been set outside the normal Spending Review process" (UK Statistics Authority 2009).

A body such as the UK SA, occurring in any liberal democracy, can subject government to a rigorous assessment of the information that it communicates. Deliberative democracy, where information that deliberators can better trust and

accept as factual, will accordingly be strengthened. Yet, bodies such as UK SA should not have to burden the regulation of government communication alone. A healthy public sphere, where interlocutors expose actors such as government to “rational criticism,” will also be involved in this job. To enable this, government must place as much information in the public domain as possible. Indeed the New Labour government, in March 2010, began to move in this direction by promising to place much more government data in the public domain than was previously the case. The recent setup of *data.gov.uk*, showed the government’s drive in this direction. The website states, “We’re very aware that there are more people like you outside of government who have the skills and abilities to make wonderful things out of public data. These are our first steps in building a collaborative relationship with you” (HM Government 2010). Moreover, the employment of Sir Tim Berners-Lee and Professor Nigel Shadbolt, showed the government was clearly trying to improve the relationship between the state and the citizen. Perhaps, unknowingly, it is improving the conditions for deliberative democracy. Moreover, initiatives such as the *Datablog* on the *Guardian* website show clearly the results that this kind of activity can have (Guardian 2010). Users are encouraged to take raw data, investigate and interrogate it, and to submit their findings back to the *Guardian*, often in the form of visualising data.

## Deliberation and Collective Judgement

When making normative arguments on deliberative democracy and the public sphere, it is perhaps the UK Parliament that can be looked upon as an ideal-type model (or microcosm) of how a public sphere can be modeled. Davis (2009) outlined this argument, stating that “as a system, the UK parliament is very much oriented around public sphere ideals in both its institutional formation and the cultural norms and values adopted by the politicians within” (2009, 289). Discussing Parliament as an ideal-type public sphere model is not unproblematic. Clearly, there are many ways in which Parliament does not function well as a public sphere; not least with regards to its problematic nature of not being very representative of the British public. However, it stands as a normatively important model of the public sphere, as one that embodies the formal principles of deliberative democracy. This article will proceed on the contention that deliberative democracy might be strengthened if the affairs of Parliament are better communicated and disseminated. The notion follows that if the public are more commonly exposed to ideal-type deliberation, then deliberation in the wider public sphere may be improved. By this I mean that by exposing the public to the kind of debate that takes place in Parliament, they may encounter a type of debate that is not commonly seen elsewhere in mainstream media.

In many Western democracies, for reasons pertaining to the market liberalisation of the public sphere, the reporting of Parliament has greatly declined. Detailed accounts of debates have all but disappeared from the national press, with some of the only parliamentary reporting focusing on the comic, as seen in the work of the sketch writers. Moreover, ministers commonly speak to the press before a Parliamentary announcement, flouting the clear conventions set out on the matter. There is a need for Parliament to take the initiative on the matter, and to improve its own communication: both to the press and to the public. Given the system of



governance that operates in the UK, with one party usually having a massive working majority, it therefore *de facto* is the responsibility of the government to propose and guide such changes. The *Putnam Commission report* on the UK Parliament, argued that the UK parliaments failure to communicate has led to widespread misunderstanding of Parliament's function and its importance (Hansard Society 2005). As Kalitowski argues, "research suggests that most people are not willing to pro-actively seek information about Parliament and are almost totally reliant on what they see on television or read in the newspapers for information" (Kalitowski 2008, 11). Here government can be influential. For example, enacting recommendations that follow those set out by the Putnam commission would be exemplary of this. The commission's recommendations suggested that "all of Parliament's communication with the public" be driven by the following five principles: "Accessibility and Transparency"; "Participation and Responsiveness"; "Accountability with the Public"; "Inclusiveness"; "A model of good practice in management and communication" (Hansard Society 2005). These five principles may also be extended to communication with journalists, with one way that these may be enacted being through broadcasting policies and legislation. In the UK, the government can be hugely influential on the content Public Service Broadcasting, through the enacting of legislation. Mandating that Parliament is extensively covered by broadcast media, can be massively influential over the extent to which the operations of a parliament are exposed to the public.

In the UK, the establishment of the BBC Parliament channel is representative of this. Moreover, the recently launched *Democracy Live* website is a perfect example of how PSBs can deliver content in the public sphere that would simply be untenable under the market model. Launching in November 2009, *Democracy Live* offers coverage of the House of Commons, House of Lords, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish Parliament and the European Parliament. Also, footage from select committees from in the Houses of Parliament is carried. Moreover, as all content is searchable, *Democracy Live* thematises footage across its archive. For example, a user may follow attention that the issue of "housing" gets in the elected institutions, and view debates that have taken place on this theme. Indeed, what the website offers the user is essentially unrivaled in terms of what the market could deliver, or indeed what parliament itself could deliver. This takes us to a position where the role of Public Service Broadcasting is integral to the communication of parliament, and in doing so, the strengthening of the public sphere. PSBs, through their vast resources – technical and financial – can offer a strategic and comprehensive way to communicate parliament.

Given the (supposedly) egalitarian nature of public service broadcasting, it is open – as in the Habermasian principle – to all people. Through the communication of the affairs of parliament, in a largely unmediated manner, the debates that occur in the legislature can be exposed to deliberation in the public sphere. There may of course be room for greater development and improvement. For example, carrying BBC parliament on DAB radio (as once was the case) would open it up to an even wider audience, and make it accessible in the places where one can listen to the radio when television viewing is not possible. Furthermore, could BBC Parliament become like *Democracy Live*, where multi-screen technology would facilitate its multiple streams? However, as there is still much digital exclusion online, the

BBC must be careful to not develop online ahead of what it develops offline, on television and radio. Consequently, government should mandate to Public Service Broadcasters (the BBC) that parliament be extensively communicated through television, radio and the Internet. As the reasoning and testing of arguments takes place in parliament, with this process widely communicated in the public sphere, then the conditions of deliberative democracy may be enhanced, with the public better equipped to reach collective judgement.

## Conclusions: Furthering the Research to Take Account of the Case of Online Deliberation

When we consider journalism, government communication, deliberative democracy and the public sphere, the role of the Internet becomes an unavoidable question. Indeed, we can see a broad narrative in recent literature which takes these themes into account, and by weaving them together attempts to deal with the issue of the internet, online public spheres and online deliberative democracy. Habermas has himself dealt with this issue, arguing largely against the existence of public spheres online, at least judged against the standards that he sets out in his normative model (discussed extensively above). Stating that the Internet reintroduces “deliberative elements in electronic communication,” and “has certainly reactivated the grass-roots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers,” he argues that it can only really further the democratic cause through its ability to undermine censorship in countries where this is readily applied to the media (Habermas 2006, 9). Rather, as the Internet usually is colonised by single or special interest groups, insularly focused, and not commonly focused on the advancement of public good, the Internet’s role in strengthening the public sphere is limited. Moreover, “The Web provides the hardware for the delocalisation of an intensified and accelerated mode of communication, but it can itself do nothing to stem the centrifugal tendencies” (2009, 158).

For Fishkin, the internet offers a means of carrying out deliberative polling, but at a reduced cost: “Eventually, Deliberative Polling on the Internet promises great advantages in terms of cost and in terms of flexibility in the time required of participants [...] Internet-based Deliberative Polls offer the promise of greater convenience and continuing dialogue” (Fishkin 2009a, 29). However given the *digital divide*, whereby many remain without online access, deliberative polling online is currently problematic. However, he concedes that if this issue was overcome, online polling “may eventually surpass the face-to-face process. One can only answer this question through further empirical work” (Fishkin 2009a, 31). Moreover, Dahlberg (2001), Blumler and Coleman (2001) and Street and Wright (2007), attempt to come to terms with issues of government involvement and provision, and issues of design in the deliberative process online. Dahlberg argues that whilst some government initiatives globally try to institute deliberative models online, they very often are reduced to simply following *liberal-individualist* ideals. Moreover, even if governments were to offer deliberatively based online forums, there remains a “need for public deliberations independent of administrative power,” an argument which follows the classical Habermasian position that the public sphere should normatively exist outside of the control and reach of the state (Dahlberg 2001, 621).

Blumler and Coleman take a similar position when they recommend “the creation of a new organisation, publicly funded but independent from government, to encourage and report upon a wide range of exercises in electronic democracy. Its remit would be “to foster new forms of public involvement in civic affairs through interactive and other appropriate means” (Blumler and Coleman 2001, 4). Viewing this in rational terms, they state “At best, the new media can be said to have a vulnerable potential to improve public communications. If they are to be a force for democracy, a policy intervention is required that is both visionary and practical” (Blumler and Coleman 2001, 4). Finally, Street and Wright see the issue in terms of design in relation to online deliberative spaces, suggesting that it is “how discussion is organised within the medium of communication helps to determine whether or not the result will be deliberation or cacophony” (Street and Wright 2007, 850).

This article has contended that the normative theory of the public sphere offers a sound position from which to make arguments on deliberative democracy, government communication and journalism. It has shown that a certain type of government communication – independently regulated – to journalists and to the public, might strengthen deliberative democracy within the public sphere. By addressing government communication under the categories of the pooling of knowledge, exposing one sidedness, and the enhancement of collective judgement, normative arguments can be made for a certain type of government communication. The twin theories of deliberative democracy and the Habermasian model of the public sphere allow for the making of arguments that could have tangible impacts upon government communication in the future. With regards to the UK, I have shown that some recent initiatives and developments in government communication have begun to move towards a position whereby – within the framework of this argument – deliberative democracy might begin to be improved. Whilst these arguments primarily relate to the UK, they are also generalisable into other western liberal democratic settings. They may not be relevant elsewhere, as many other countries already have made significant improvements in this area. However, the normative principles on government communication that we can draw from public sphere theory, with respect to deliberative democracy, have importance that means they ought to apply in multiple settings.

### Notes:

1. Habermas (1992) accepted that the public sphere was best conceptualised in the plural. Moreover, in *Between Facts and Norms* he argued that the public sphere “branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas” (Habermas 1996, 373). Positing the existence of literary, religious and feminist spheres for example, Habermas states that these make up a panoply of “abstract public sphere[s] of isolated readers, listeners and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media” (1996, 374).

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*SIHO NAM*

## KRITIČNA MEDIJSKA PISMENOST KOT KURIKULARNA PRAKSA: PREUREJANJE PEDAGOŠKIH MEJNIH PODROČIJ MEDIJSKE PISMENOSTI V AMERIŠKIH PROGRAMIH MNOŽIČNEGA KOMUNICIRANJA

Trenutni zastoj programov množičnega komuniciranja kot niti strokovne niti polnovredne akademske discipline v visokem šolstvu ZDA je globoko zakoreninjen v postopnem izhlapevanju kritičnega. Članek si prizadeva za povrnitev »kritičnega« na področju medijske pismenosti s tremi ključnimi cilji. Prvič, poskuša problematizirati vse večjo poklicno usmerjeno izobraževanja na področju množičnega komuniciranja. Drugič, poskuša zgraditi filozofsko, teoretsko osnovo za kritično medijsko pismenost s pomočjo kritičnih teorij izobraževanja, kot so jih razvili Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux in drugi. Tretjič, opredeljuje nekatera ključna področja kritične medijske pismenosti, da bi preoblikovali množično komuniciranje kot interdisciplinarno akademsko področje v širšem okviru demokracije. Na koncu članek navaja prepričljive razloge za repositioniranje kritične medijske pismenosti kot pedagogike možnosti, ki odpira nov pedagoški prostor za alternativno, protihegemonsko izobraževanje in prakse na področju množičnega komuniciranja.

COBISS 1.01

*TODD GRAHAM*

## POGOVOR O POLITIKI NA SPLETNIH PROSTORIH POPULARNE KULTURE: PRIMER FORUMA BIG BROTHER

Pogovor o politiki na spletu ni vezan na prostore, namenjene politiki, še zlasti ko gre za vsakdanji politični pogovor, ki je bistvenega pomena za javno sfero. Namen tega članka je seči onkraj takih posebnih prostorov s proučevanjem političnega pogovora znotraj prostora, namenjenega popularni kulturi. Namen je, da ugotovimo, ali forum resničnostne TV zagotavlja komunikacijski prostor, vsebino in slog za politiko, ki razširja javno sfero onkraj običajnega pomena. Središčno vprašanje je, ali izpolnjuje pogoja racionalnosti in posvetovanja. Analiza sega onkraj formalnega pojmovanja z raziskovanjem povezanosti ekspresivnih govornih dejanj z bolj tradicionalnimi elementi posvetovanja. Rezultati kažejo, da se je skoraj četrtnina objav v vzorcu foruma Big Brother ukvarjala s politiko, pogosto na posvetovalen način. To je bil komunikacijski prostor, kjer je uporaba ekspresivov tako olajševala kot oteževala politični govor.

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*LEOPOLDINA FORTUNATI*

*JOHN O'SULLIVAN*

*LILIA RAYCHEVA*

*HALLIKI HARRO-LOIT*

## **INTERAKTIVNOST KOT METAFORA NOVIC NA SPLETU**

Ali so uporabniki omejili moč uveljavljenih medijev preko interaktivnosti, in če je tako, v kolikšni meri in v kakšen namen? Primere interaktivnosti v praksi smo iskali na prvih straneh spletnih časopisov v Bolgariji, Estoniji, na Irskem in v Italiji. Članek iz več zornih kotov predstavlja in analizira metodološke poti za analizo interaktivnih praks v spletnih časopisih. Analizirani so struktura in pogostejši modeli interaktivnosti, vrste forumov, komunikativni tok med bralci in uredništvu; načini samopredstavitve bralcev in novinarjev ter ritualnost njihovih odnosov na forumih. Študija kaže, da so spletni časopisi v prvi fazi internetne distribucije še vedno v fazi pred-interaktivnosti.

COBISS 1.01

*BRETT OMMEN*

## **O ODNOSU MED GLASOM IN AVTORITETO V KOMUNICIRANJU »ON MESSAGE«**

Komuniciranje »on message« omogoča politični oblasti odgovoriti na potrebo po pooblaščenem govoru s stabilnim sporočilom, okrepljenim z enoličnimi predstavami. Strategija razkriva, kako spremembe materialnih in institucionalnih mehanizmov diskurzivne prakse bistveno spremenijo kategorije, s katerim razumemo, analiziramo in se odzivamo na retorične produkcije. Članek na primeru administracije Georgea W. Busha kaže, da komuniciranje »on message« deluje kot posebna oblika personifikacije neživih stvari, besednega ekvivalenta zakrivanja s krinko. Projekt prikazuje spremenljivo razmerje med politično oblastjo in nastopanjem; komuniciranje »on message« preoblikuje klasični primer personifikacije in spreminja odnos med javnostmi in politično oblastjo.

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# NOVINARSTVO, POSVETOVALNA DEMOKRACIJA IN VLADNO KOMUNICIRANJE: NORMATIVNI ARGUMENTI IZ TEORIJE JAVNOSTI

Članek obravnava teorije deliberativne demokracije, javne sfere in vladno komuniciranje ter raziskuje, na kakšne načine bi lahko vladno komuniciranje okrepilo deliberativno demokracijo v širšem kontekstu novinarstva. Članek se začneja s proučevanjem Habermasovega normativnega modela javne sfere in upošteva njegovega poznejšega dela o središčnem pomenu posvetovalnega procesa v javni sferi. V drugem delu aplicira Heldovo pojmovanje o vlogi vladnega komuniciranja v krepitvi posvetovalne demokracije in poskuša postaviti normativne argumente glede nekaterih oblik vladnega komuniciranja. Pri tem obravnava tri področja: težave z obstoječim lobističnim sistemom pojasnjevanja novinarjem v Veliki Britaniji; načine, kako bi lahko vlada komunicirala, da bi bila bolj upoštevana v javni sferi; ter načine, kako bi lahko izboljšano komuniciranje parlamenta vplivalo na posvetovalno demokracijo.

## ANNUAL INDEX OF ARTICLES Vol. 17 (2010)

- Brüggemann, Michael: Information Policy and the Public Sphere EU Communications and the Promises of Dialogue and Transparency, 1, 5-22.
- Brundidge, Jennifer: Political Discussion and News Use in the Contemporary Public Sphere: The "Accessibility" and "Traversability" of the Internet, 2, 63-82.
- Evens, Tom, Pieter Verdegem, Lieven De Marez: Balancing Public and Private Value for the Digital Television Era, 1, 37-54.
- Fortunati, Leopoldina, John O'Sullivan, Lilia Raycheva, Halliki Harro-Loit: Interactivity as a Metaphor of Online News, 4, 43-62.
- Frago, Marta, Teresa La Porte, Patricia Phalen: The Narrative Reconstruction of 9/11 in Hollywood Films: Independent Voice or Official Interpretation?, 3, 57-70.
- Graham, Todd: Talking Politics Online within Spaces of Popular Culture: The Case of the Big Brother Forum, 4, 25-42.
- Iosifidis, Petros: Pluralism and Concentration of Media Ownership: Measurement Issues, 3, 5-22.
- Jin, Dal Yong: Critical Interpretation of Hybridisation in Korean Cinema: Does the Local Film Industry Create "The Third Space"? 1, 55-72.
- Lah, Marko, Andrej Sušjan, Tjaša Redek: An Institutional View of Public Relations and the Evolution of Public Relations in Transition Economies, 2, 45-62.
- Lecheler, Sophie K., Malte C. Hinrichsen: Role Conceptions of Brussels Correspondents from the New Member States, 1, 73-86.
- Lee, Hsiao-wen: The Popular Press and Its Public in China, 3, 71-86.
- Nah, Seungahn: A Theoretical and Analytical Framework toward Networked Communities: A Case of the Electronic Community Information Commons, 1, 23-36.
- Nam, Siho: Critical Media Literacy as Curricular Praxis: Remapping the Pedagogical Borderlands of Media Literacy in U.S. Mass Communication Programs, 4, 5-24.
- Ommen, Brett: On the Relationship between Voice and Authority in On Message Communication, 4, 63-80.
- Ramsey, Phil: Journalism, Deliberative Democracy and Government Communication: Normative Arguments from Public Sphere Theory, 4, 81-96.
- Sparviero, Sergio: Understanding the Problematic Relationship between Economics and Communication Studies and Potential Solutions, 2, 27-44.
- Spörer-Wagner, Doreen, Frank Marcinkowski: Is Talk Always Silver and Silence Golden? The Mediatization of Political Bargaining, 2, 5-26.
- Thumim, Nancy, Lilie Chouliarakis: Legitimising the BBC in the Digital Cultural Sphere: The Case of Capture Wales, 2, 83-100.
- Tsatsou, Panayiota: Internet Policy and Regulation through a Socio-Cultural Lens: A Dialogue between Society's Culture and Decision-Makers? 3, 23-38.
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Published by  
Faculty of Social Sciences,  
University of Ljubljana, for  
the European Institute for  
Communication and Culture

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