

# COUNTER-PUBLIC SPHERES AND THE REVIVAL OF THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

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## Abstract

From a theoretical point of view concepts of critical counter publicity are again widely discussed. However, both the socio-political relevance as well as the empirical dimension of this process – e.g. in how far counter-public spheres turn out to be a source of democratic public in reality – are mostly left out of consideration in the scientific discourse. The article first reconstructs descriptive and normative opinions on counter-public from a media-based perspective, and elaborates on the relationship between the public sphere, counter-public spheres, and new media. Then it discusses the potential of counter-public activities to revive the public sphere, particularly in the framework of the European Union. Two case studies of European-wide counter-public spheres are presented: the collective *Luther Blissett* and the network organisation of *Attac*. Their structural characteristics such as transnationality, network structure, and anti-copyright stance generate a new – “trans-European” – form of collective identity. As a result, the European integration may also gain (unintentionally) a new momentum.

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## Communication Deficits of a European Public Sphere

The Europeanisation of the public sphere still stays clearly behind the Europeanisation of politics. On the one hand neither EU-protagonists nor EU-issues are dealt with to a significant extent in the mass media. Media coverage is dominated by national topics and agents (e.g. Kunelius and Sparks 2001). Political topics on a European-wide agenda are commented from the viewpoint of the respective country. On the other hand, civil society's state of participation seems insignificant. The discourse about Europe is to a great extent limited to the political elites involving few public intellectuals and mass media. But in classical theory of democracy a functioning public is regarded as a structural as well as a procedural necessity for democracy. Therefore, the creation of a public in the sense of a broad discourse about European topics is an important requirement for an extensive political and cultural European integration (e.g. Krotz 1998a). Habermas' analysis of the structural change of modern public (1990) also applies to the European public. The up-to-now development of a rudimental European public clearly parallels the genesis of national civic publics at the end of the 18th century. Fenton and Downey interpret Habermas in a more profane sense: "Horizontal communication between citizens is increasingly replaced by vertical communication between mass media, greatly influenced by both the state and capital, and consumers. The space for participatory communication of citizens is severely constricted" (2003, 17). Under this aspect, Europe's political deficits can be defined as communication deficits (Gerhards 1993). This shortcoming has consequences for all levels of the public sphere – simple interactive systems, public events and mass communication (see Gerhards and Neidhardt 1991). Thus, it can only be called a European public when all different national publics are combined like an "osmotic diffusion" (Habermas 2001).

The concept of "public" has always been related to the questions of power, control, and exclusion (Fraser 1992; Meehan 1995). Negt and Kluge (1972) pointed out that public is a form of organisation on the basis of societal experience. This form of organisation deals with competing interests as well as with the fact of withholding special experience conflicting with possible interests. Similarly, a European public is being generated within a process in which a European identity is being constructed, negotiated, and changed primarily through mass media, bringing about significant differences, such as the imbalances between female and male publics in the context of the European public. Since there does not exist one single European identity being conveyed consistently by the media, a lack of possibilities to create identification is clearly to be seen. The basic function of giving orientation, which is in line with Habermas' concept of public, is not being fulfilled on a European level. Furthermore, the political system and its decision makers are not directly bound to various national public opinions. Consequently, interpreting Habermas' concept of public in a narrow sense, Europe cannot be referred to as a democracy since eventually the rulers are not opposed by a critical and political public (Habermas 1990, 33).

In his "revision" Habermas points to civil society groups, which have a critical look at the political public (Habermas 1992). His argument seems plausible in a national context but not in the European context where, according to Gerhards (1993, 104), no critical public exists in terms of protests or social movements. Nev-

ertheless, several critical counter-public spheres demand to counteract against public deficits. Under a sociological perspective Fenton and Downey are arguing that “counter-public spheres offer the best prospects for encouraging democratisation on a local, national, and international level” (2003, 16). Specific European counter-public spheres were carried by the media for the first time in connection with the criticism of globalisation. The violent “counter summit” against the European Council Meeting in Göteborg, Sweden, in July 2001 was regarded as publication worthy.

## Media Based Elements of Counter-Public Spheres

After the institutionalisation of the alternative movement in the 1980s, counter-public spheres are currently re-gaining broad societal relevance. The increasing influence can be attributed to three interrelated factors: (1) political change – the increasing political globalisation and its criticism, (2) technological change – new media and their possibilities, and (3) social change consisting of two processes. On the one hand, the “reflexive modernisation” and “network society” are producing new possibilities for progressive political collective actors. Non-established actors like new social movements (NSMs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are taking over central functions of the classic political institutions and organisations. On the other hand, the crisis of the (dominant) public sphere fosters critical voices in politics. This crisis results from the decline of social trust (Fenton and Downey 2003) and a destabilisation of the political communication (Dahlgren 2002). The technical development as well as the rise of computer-mediated communication have an immense impact on both societal and political development.

Although the relevance of counter-public spheres is again widely discussed on a theoretic basis (e.g. Downey and Fenton 2003; Fenton and Downey 2003), the concept still appears very diffuse (Rucht 1994, 350). From a communication point of view different phenomena are discussed or subsumed under the concept of counter-public spheres, such as “emancipatory use of media” (Enzensberger 1970), “independent non-civic connection of experience” (Negt and Kluge 1972), “alternative communication” (Weichler 1987), “alternative public” (Stamm 1988), “alternative media” (Scholl and Bobbenkamp 1993), or “oppositional or minority practice” (Grossberg 2000).<sup>1</sup> The existing research mostly consists of a descriptive systematisation of counter-public spheres – their actors, actions, media etc. – and of modelling them as a “critical part of the public.” Even if earlier analyses present content and formal qualities of counter-public spheres, explanatory approaches – e.g. the revealing of consequences and causes of counter-public spheres and their tense relation to the public – mostly remain empirically unconsidered. However, normative (mainly political) premises are often appended, the most popular source being Negt and Kluge (1972). Other critical analyses, mainly oriented at cultural studies, call for an overcoming of the dominant static-dualistic concept of one existing public sphere and several counter-public spheres (e.g. Asen 2000; Fiske 1994).

Basically, the term “counter-public spheres” refers to two dimensions. On the one hand, it refers to critical partial publics aiming to bring their positions – which they feel are being marginalised and which are also often named “counter-public” – to mass media by means of alternative media and actions and therewith gain public attention (“alternative public spheres”). On the other hand, the term counter-public spheres also describes a collective and above all political process of learn-

ing and experiencing within alternative forms of organisation as for example NSMs, NGOs etc. ("participatory counter-public spheres"). Both of the above shortly outlined ways of practice represent three propositions about public, media, and democracy: (1) Counter-public as the "concern about democracy" in the sense of a critical development of classic concepts of enlightenment, (2) authentic reporting from the point of view of those who are affected as critique about mass media, and (3) communication as an emancipatory strategy of individuals (Oy 2001).

Stamm regards the media as "tools in the social process [of counter-public spheres] and not, as is often falsely assumed, as the social process itself" (1988, 14). Therefore, alternative media are only to be understood "as a materially graspable, concrete expression of the production of the public, as it is achieved by the new social movements" (1988, 14). According to Lovink (1992) counter-public media can historically be divided according to their function into (1) "alternative," (2) "movement-owned," and (3) "sovereign" media (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-Gruppe 1997, 177).

"Alternative" media are complementary to the mainstream-media.<sup>2</sup> They are supposed to broaden the spectre of information and contribute to a more liberal public through additional and corrective reporting. Since the beginning of the 70s, mainly new social movements (NSMs)<sup>3</sup> in Western Europe have developed structures of such 'alternative public spheres' which became manifest in the creation of information services, book shops, and radio stations and thus, have mostly represented a media public. NSMs turned the term counter-public into a political term for a strategy of dealing critically with existing political and mass media institutions. Thus, Stamm (1988) regards counter-public spheres as a mouthpiece for alternative concepts of life, as an "anti-institutional discursive public," which shall create a subsystem of public independent from the mass media system through its own communication infrastructure (leaflets, alternative press etc.).

An important reason for the construction of counter-public spheres is the subjective feeling of those affected, that information, messages, news etc. they produce do not find the way into the mainstream media. Thus a number of alternative media projects see their task in spreading the news not reported in the mainstream media. Anyone who is taken up by mass media and whose messages are broadcast, has a chance that her opinions will be noticed by large parts of the population. This circumstance led the NSMs, who were in opposition to ruling politics and opinions, to try to counterbalance the dominant media contents with other issues or alternative media content without, however, changing the structure of the established public. Yet the concept of an alternative public goes beyond the mere counter-balance. Additional criteria arise from the practice of alternative media (e.g., modified style of lettering, changes in conditions and forms of production). Due to the liberalisation of broadcast media and the rapid growth of the Internet, the alternative public has been in a constant flux that continued throughout the 1980s. Whereas previously, alternative public used to be limited to print media, new alternative (media) publics developed recently by the help of free radio stations and alternative Internet projects. As Dorer (1995) shows, commercialisation, institutionalisation, and media-political activities of the government influenced in the 1990s the idealistic concepts of "alternative" media.

Counter-public spheres on the one hand serve the function of creating a public for one's own alternative lifestyle. On the other hand, reaching a large public also

plays an important role. “Movement-owned” media, however, do not aim directly at influencing public opinion. In contrast to alternative media, they position themselves partly outside the mainstream society: content-wise this is achieved both through radical political statements and by taking up sub-cultural issues and codes. Movement-owned media are focal points of social practice and offer orientation for the collective identity (a kind of “participatory counter-public sphere”). One may assume that nowadays these movement-owned media have more and more obtained an organisational function, mainly through new technological means of communication. Therefore their once political function is pushed to the background.

Lovink sees the “sovereign” media as a result of the “missionary work” of alternative and movement-owned media (1992, 26). In contrast to these, sovereign media do neither adhere to target groups nor to other directives. Moreover, they are only likely to exist in connection with the possibilities offered by the new electronic media. (e.g. open source software, free radios). Therefore they are “difficult to recognise, because the form in which they appear can never shine in all its glory” (Lovink 1992, 27).

Counter-public spheres basically consist of (1) alternative media content and (2) alternative media practice (ways of production, layout etc.), which can be part of a (political) movement since the days of the NSMs. The production of an internal public as a collective identity, as well as an external public as e.g. public resonance are determined by these elements. Culture-oriented analyses (e.g. Asen 2000; Caldwell 2003; Stamm 1988) clearly show that these dimensions cannot be regarded as being mutually independent. Thus, the described dual concept of one existing public sphere and various counter-public spheres simplifies social reality; counter-public spheres exceed mass media practice. In a comprehensive sense, they are also a social practice (fashion, art, lifestyle etc.), “which is rooted in completely diverse views of the world and concepts of life and which places publicly-distributed information in totally different discourses and contexts and thus, in different partial publics” (Krotz 1998b, 653). Therefore, counter-public spheres represent not only a strategy but also (3) a social process.

## Counter-Public Spheres and the New Media

The above outlined concept of counter-public spheres is linked with both risks and opportunities, which is also true for democratic consequences resulting from the new media. New media – in particular, the Internet –strongly differ from the classic media because they operate “according to principles fundamentally different from those of broadcast media: access, participation, reciprocity, and many-to-many rather than one-to-many communication” (Jenkins and Thorburn 2003, 2). In the course of digitalisation new possibilities have emerged: in the process of creating text, different text passages can be linked together (hypertext), combined with other media types (multimedia), and changed by the recipient arbitrarily (interactivity).

Questions arise as to whether the innovativeness of the new communication technologies also forces changes in the media-generated public. The thesis of the “Internet as democracy generating machine” (Oy 1998) suggests that new ways of communication revitalise democracy. Advocates of the new media in the context of counter-public spheres virtually praise the “digital gospel” (Enzensberger 2000).

They are persuaded of the fact that the characteristics of the new media, such as interactivity, decentralisation, and the general accessibility may well cause another structural change of the public. New media's enormous democratic potential is attributed primarily to the fact that due to technical progress the separation between transmitter and receiver can finally be abolished (Enzensberger 1970, 160-73). Digital applications are not only means of reducing distance and providing fast communication but also enable a nearly unrestricted expansion of the internal and external circle of members paired with interactivity. In this way, the use of the Internet by the civil society on the one hand, seemingly offers new democratic potentials, e.g. an increase in information and deliberation or an increase in the individual political and media organisation.

Yet these positive developments are opposed by possible dysfunctions. The established political elites also keep on having an influence on new media rapidly passing on the myth of "cyberspace" to the field of political economy. Although digitalisation means an increase in information, it does not necessarily imply more information in the context of public processes.<sup>4</sup> The context in which communication takes place needs to be considered. In this way, carrying out and participating in the process of reception still constitutes the focal point of a successful process of societal communication. As a result, for example, the "National Information Infrastructure Project" (NII) of the US Government in the early 1990s decidedly formulated also socio-political and cultural aims and especially tried to involve those societal interests and agents who were ignored by the powers of the market economy (Kleinstauber 2001).

We find that the technical development in the field of media influences the possibilities of counter-public spheres. By firstly defining the forms and limits of communication newly, however, then also giving the space that individual ways of dealing with the media can be created. Digitalisation describes the process in which more and more people are ever faster and easier to be reached. Therefore, publics linked to this development are becoming more open. Thus, for counter-public spheres internal as well as external publics are faster to produce. Ultimately, they reach more people than what was still imaginable a decade ago. Especially the numerous NSMs and NGOs cannot be thought without the new technical possibilities. In fact, they are relying heavily on Internet communication. One famous example is the protests against the WTO conference in Seattle in 1999 causing worldwide media repercussion. New media in particular helped organise the protests (Smith 2001; Wall 2002). Beside the above outlined ability to mobilise masses (Couldry and Curran 2003; Garcia and Lovink 1999), new media also provide the possibility of a new way of articulation for the counter-public spheres. In this way, advocates of the counter-public spheres use the Internet to (1) represent their marginalised interests (Siapera 2004), (2) offer a forum for alternative media coverage (Hamm and Zaiser 2000; Harding 1998) or (3) critically watch the established media reporting ("media watchdogs").

Consequently, counter-public web presences serve as inquiry and presentational tools for the recipients and especially through this also pass knowledge on to the public. These online sources cannot only offer additional information but also an attractive and authentic journalistic style. This is true not only due to the growing competition and pressure to always be up to date but also in times of journalist crises when the process of free inquiry is highly limited by censorship or other



barriers (e.g. reporting during war). In this way, the British judicial worker Jo Wilding for example instantaneously reported like a correspondent about her experience in the field of humanitarian aid in Iraq. The German leading newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* directly adopted the wording of the online discussion about the war in Iraq led on the homepage of the non-profit organisation *Opendemocracy* (Wilding 2004).

In addition, the alternative media practice of counter-public spheres in the context of the Internet also has to be considered. As a consequence the non-hierarchical and interactive structure of many counter-public discussions on the Internet (many-to-many) as well as the (virtual) community of counter-public spheres characterised by generating a common identity (community media) are to a great extent reflected slightly moderated in the online issues of established media publications. For example the online magazine *Telepolis* (<http://www.heise.de/tp>) offers the possibility of commenting each article and possibly linking it. The online issue of the German *Neon* magazine – in a different manner also the German publication *SZ-Magazin jetzt* – with its so-called “Neon-net-of-experts” open for everyone, “wants to provide the opportunity for the readers and authors to exchange information and opinions” (available at: <http://www.neon.de>). The underlying intention of this seeming abolition of the unidirectional communication process is to foster the liaison between reader and medium. Beside numerous discussion forums, virtual archives, mailing lists etc. currently counter-public weblogs offer the opportunity to communicate, get informed, and mobilise.<sup>5</sup> Beside the trustworthiness and authenticity (often wrongly) ascribed to the media the public is also boosted by the fact that counter-public online sources are very fast.

During the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, *Indymedia*’s local New York group was one of the first being able to deliver current news. News was inquired by local activists and put online. The servers of established news brokers were out of order due to capacity overload. Peer-to-peer networks are currently emerging in this field which could supersede classic functions of journalism like providing orientation and service. Although it is said that in the US only more than four million weblogs exist up to now only a very small proportion of them of course has been frequently updated and visited. This finding applies in the figurative sense to all counter-public spheres connected with computer-based communication. In relation to the aggregate population and the traditional mass media, the number of participating persons seems very small. With an increase in the potential of new media, the danger of capacity overload and wrong use also rises because the structure of the addressed public is not completely clear any more. One example is the protest against the *World Economic Forum* in Davos in 2003 when the counter-public spheres were incorporated in the so-called *Oltner Bündnis*; they used the home page not only for the criticism of authorities but also for internal discussions.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, until now research has not delivered answers to the question in how far the sketched forms of public have an influence on the traditional political public and the actions of established political agents, such as governments and parties.

## Counter-Publics Revive the European Public

The counter-public discourse focuses on two basic dimensions – (1) public and counter-public as concepts of democracy theory (Habermas 1990; Calhoun 1992)

and (2) as a space of communication and the contingent public connected to it. The concept of public in the sense of a sphere for public communication or an audience connected by public communication again plays a vital role for providing legitimacy, a collective identity, and democracy (e.g. Peters 1994, 2003).

From a normative point of view, the public represents a sector of societal communication in which free citizens should discuss affairs of general interest. The model of political reasoning (Habermas 1990) seems to be utopian today, for only in very rare cases we can talk of dialogue-oriented communication processes in the sense of political reasoning (e.g. Calhoun 1993). The increasing dependence of the public which is reciprocally pervaded by politics, media, and economics seems problematic from the viewpoint of democratic politics. The public is a mostly passive entity. Furthermore, not all publics are equally involved in the communication process. In the European Union, political communication and the formation of opinion are dominated by elites. To solve this problem Habermas demands a “revival of lost possibilities of expression and communication” against the “colonisation” of the environment (Habermas 1996). In his opinion civil society plays a vital role for democracy due to the rigidity of the institutionalised governmental organisations and structures (parliament, government, political parties etc.). It is especially Habermas’ concept of civil society and the phenomenon he found of “politics beyond the regulated structures” which seems to be fertile for further empirical analysis (e.g. Dahlberg 2001; Sassi 2001). Stamm’s piece of research in Germany is the ideal type for this kind of research. In his historical-sociological analysis of NSMs in the Federal Republic of Germany he notices a reactivation of some structural elements of the “classic civil public” through counter-public spheres (Stamm 1988, 271):

*It is interesting that the new movements especially carry on ideas and claims that the bourgeoisie in its constitutional phase put against the arcane practice of aristocracy and clergy. The new social movements mobilise in particular those elements of a model of liberal public, which have been perverted or robbed of their original power by a structural change of the liberal public itself.*

This primarily refers to those democratic elements (freedom of speech, right of assembly, political involvement), which helped to mobilise the citizens against the aristocratic public (Habermas 1990). Imhof and Gaetano assume a similar public potential (1996, 207):

*Nevertheless, we owe one the hand, the existence of the plebiscitary-democratic institutions of a modern constitutional state and on the other hand, a trick of history to the Enlightenment’s deeply political understanding of the public. Especially by constantly comparing the utopia of Enlightenment with what became of it, liberal societies keep a powerful potential of criticism. The public as a medial “published-ness” and therefore as a means of political as well as economical marketing becomes the main point of criticism and thus, the modern problem of democracy theory.*

As a conclusion from a normative point of view, counter-public spheres can develop a certain potential to correct and innovate the established political system. The indicators for normative demands on a democratic public like equality, openness or orientation developed by Peters (1994) could provide a useful founda-



tion for further research. From a socio-political point of view Rucht points to the advocacy articulation of marginalised societal positions and the promotion of possibilities to communicate on the part of counter-public spheres (1997). Schikora (2001) emphasises the internal and external basic conditions (e.g. internal state of being or the socio-political environment) necessary for counter-public spheres to develop a democratic potential. Similarly, Fenton and Downey (2003) describe the “nature of participation” and “relative power and ability to break through the dominant public sphere” as fundamental preconditions. Consequentially, the democratic potential unfolds in three dimensions: civic self-help, citizen’s solidarity and socialisation, and the amplification of public communication by representing marginalised positions in an advocacy way. This can be achieved either by introducing the citizen to the systems which have been to this point exclusively restricted to politics and socio-economy, or by creating internal and external publics, especially on the local level. On the basis of these concrete communication processes an empirical analyses may again be spurred.

The public as a space of communication is not only produced by the mass media and cannot, respectively, be reduced analytically to the media public. Still, in the context of the analysis of counter-public, the medial public and the published opinion play an important role. After all, the mass media reach a vast and disperse public which nowadays could not be reached in any other way. Moreover, one can assume that the media public (“the published opinion”) has a decisive influence on all other levels of the public sphere. In their analysis of critical reactions on the war against Iraq in 1991, Scholl and Robbenkamp (1993, 244) show on a German national level how counter-publicity affects the differentiated public levels in different ways with the example of protests against the extension of the Frankfurt airport. Their conclusion remains ambivalent: In spite of diverse and creative activities, mainly on the level of simple systems of interaction and on the level of organisational publics, “first beginnings of counter-public are not converted into effective politics” and the opinion of the medial public is not changed. In particular, the media response is a process with (sometimes too) many requirements for non-established political activists like NSMs and NGOs (e.g. Wimmer 2003). On a local level, Roland Roth (1994, 431) shows via the example of three chosen places in Germany during a time frame of 25 years, that “local milieus of movements provoke a revival of local public.” This is expressed by more constructive public debates and by a more dedicated public. The positive influence of counter-publicity, however, is strongly reduced by the “deeply fissured constant building site” of local counter-public spheres (e.g. great fluctuation of the activists), and therefore an enduring position cannot be guaranteed by it.

These possibilities and limits are also visible on a European level. The following examples of two critical counter-public spheres shall illustrate that an increasing participation of the citizens – mainly through a medially transmitted collective identity – can exist on a European level. Thereby the Internet’s role is especially taken into consideration. Due to the fact that there is at least some empirical data on explicit anti- and pro-European movements, two (non-established) European-wide actors with no explicit counter-positions on the European issue were chosen. Nevertheless, as globalisation critics both *Attac* and *Luther Blissett* are arguing that there have to be broader social and political changes on a European level.

## Case Studies

### The Communication Network of *Attac*

*Attac* abstains to a large extent both from establishing a media system that is fundamentally independent of the mainstream and from “developing alternative communication by creating alternative media” (Weichler 1987, 336). *Attac* rather tries to influence the existing media production of public opinion with alternative observations or definitions of problems (alternative media content). This counter-public sphere does no longer exclusively obtain feedback and broad effect through its visibility in the real space of open public (demonstrations, leaflets etc.), but by taking influence on the media-public space (alternative media practice).

Although it was founded in France, *Attac* has been conceived since its beginnings as a transnational organisation which is indicated by a number of structures. Apart from a yearly international meeting, a relatively loose form of exchange of experience and planning is assured through bi-monthly European meetings. As in other transnational organisations, the language barrier creates difficulties for the cooperation. A group of voluntary translators (called “Coorditrad”) tries to counterbalance this deficit. Although *Attac* follows a global approach, the core lies clearly in Europe: More than 80% of the associated members are established here. The guiding principles of *Attac*’s organisational philosophy are: pluralism, orientation on movement and basis, open, decentralised, participatory and flexible organisational structures, plurality of instruments and forms of actions, focusing on cooperation and alliance.<sup>7</sup> From a counter-public point of view three aspects are constitutive: *Attac* is a place enabling political processes of learning and experiencing, consolidating various types of emancipatory politics in discussions and common actions which in turn leads to the possibility of acting jointly in commonly defined political fields.

Two different models of membership are applied by *Attac*. In most European countries the members are not only individuals but also organisations from other socio-political fields. The extent to which both models are integrated, for example concerning the decision-making within the organisation, is solved in a different way in each country. In Germany at first *Attac* mainly had the character of a network which has many advantages. Particularly, it can rely to a large extent on financial, human, and content resources of its member organisations. In addition, the membership of big organisations – e.g. the workers’ union *ver.di* or the ecological organisation *BUND* – increases the political weight of the network organisation. However, being a mixture of a network and an organisation also leads to conflicts of interest between *Attac* and its member organisations, especially in those cases where *Attac* threatens to undermine the political importance of its member organisations. This could be observed during the reporting on Genoa in 2001 when *Attac* was nearly the only protagonist to be perceived in media public (Wimmer 2003).

Secondly, *Attac*’s internal public is to be described in more detail. Analyzing the membership structure regarding the daily use of media showed above all a very strong affinity towards the Internet (see Guttenberg et al. 2002, 67-71): about 73% of the persons surveyed independent of age said to use Internet on a regular basis or even daily. Followed by daily newspapers on second place with 70% and radio with about 64%. In relation TV is being used to a relatively small extent

amounting to about 48%. From a public theory point of view it is of interest to answer the question how they initially came to know the counter-public sphere. Over 45% of the persons surveyed came to know *Attac* for the first time by media reporting (multiple answers possible) (Guttenberg et al. 2002, 71). Schewe's research shows that for *Attac* as a counter-public agent the advantages of the Internet have an above average positive impact (2003). Thus, in 2001 about 50% of the members and 4,2% of donors could be generated via the Internet. Taking a look at the page impressions of its website, it is obvious that Internet and traditional media are complementary (Schewe 2003). As soon as *Attac* is mentioned in the media an increase in page impressions can be registered. According to Moldenhauer in 2003 *Attac Germany* possessed 90 mailing lists, 25.000 users and 4.000 visits a day. The question arises whether the rapid adoption of the Internet has also changed the forms of communication and networking in a qualitative way. In contrast to the second example of *Luther Blissett*, *Attac's* analysis is not focusing on the articulation of theoretical reflections but rather on the supply of the technical framework of communication which is to be filled by the members of this counter-public sphere themselves (Hamm and Zaiser 2000).

A more profound analysis of *Attac* shows that two decisive elements work together in its communication: Transnationality and network structure (Hepp 2003). These features contribute to the fact that *Attac* is quickly gaining access to other levels of political public and its diverse sub-political fields aside of the medial public. This is visible in the media response on the one hand, but also manifests in the strong growth of members on the other hand. After the demonstrations at the World Economic Summit in Genoa in July 2001 the amount of *Attac's* members increased ten times from 450 to 4.500. Today, *Attac* has nearly 16.000 members (including the organisations and individuals) in Germany only (<http://www.attac.de/interna/mitglied.php>). In addition, *Attac* seems to be the only non-established political actor of the globalisation discourse who was able to establish himself globally. In doing so, this counter-public sphere relies on the media structures already available and on a strong communication between its members fostered through the possibilities of the new media. Thus, on the one hand, *Attac's* analysis points to an alternative public dimension and on the other hand, to a participatory counter-public sphere.

### *Luther Blissett* – Q, Anti-Copyright and Multiple Names

The real Luther Blissett was a relative unknown British footballer who was playing in Italy in the early 1980s. Due to his lack of success he soon became known alias *Luther Missit*. Since 1994, Italian Internet-activists have published their activities as a "communication-guerrilla" (a.f.r.i.k.a.-Gruppe et al. 1997) on their website *lutherblissett.net*. One of their literary projects is the novel *Q* which by now has been published in the whole of Europe in large editions (Blissett 2003). *Q* can be seen as a symbol of the globalisation-critical movement (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000). The main theme of *Q* is resistance. For the authors of the *Luther-Blissett-Project*, the reformation with its Europe-wide political overthrows serves as a blueprint for the present. What was represented by the pope and the empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century nowadays corresponds to the globalisation of American-European style. The concept of *Q* of subtly creating parallels to our modern times without imposing them has proven to create much publicity.

An elementary means of their media-avalanche-effect is the anti-copyright stance of this counter-public sphere. Although the German publishing house *Piper* bought the German rights to the book, it has accepted the fact that the (content of the) book is available for free on the “official” *Luther-Blissett-Website* as well as on several other Internet-sites like *textz.com*. Since the beginning of the project, all books have been published with an explicit – partial or total – abstention from copyright. The reason is that “all ‘Luther Blissett’ output is an ever-changing result of a collective process of network creation and re-elaboration” ([http://www.lutherblissett.net/archive/441\\_en.html](http://www.lutherblissett.net/archive/441_en.html)). Every adherence to international copyright is seen as an affront which needs to be opposed: “Our transnational network is perfectly capable of rejecting and boycotting a work by the multiple that is not freely reproducible, at least by single persons or non-commercial purposes.” According to this, the Italian version of *Q* begins with the following introduction: “Partial or total reproduction of this book, as well as its electronic diffusion, are consented to the readers for non-commercial use.”

The concept of *multiple names*<sup>8</sup> also gains much response. The name of *Luther Blissett* is used by people all over Europe in the most diverse ways: For example by demonstrators who state it as their name when interrogated by the police in order to complicate the investigations. Internet activists use it to launch media fakes under this name. A certain Luther Blissett had the Italian version of the T.V. show *Please Come Back!* look for a supposedly lost friend called Harry Kipper who in reality was fictitious. Ultimately, the multiple name helps to create a sort of collective identity which is tied to a decidedly critical media practice. This also distinguishes this counter-public sphere clearly from the affirmative strategy of *Attac*. Furthermore, the counter-public sphere evoked by *Luther Blissett* does not adhere to certain pre-formulated intentions: The audience here is apparently free to interpret the meaning of alternative media content and practice in their everyday life. However, this function was not intended on such a broad basis from the beginning. *Luther Blissett*’s founders, political activists and artists coming from the Bolognese autonomous left-wing scene, state that they not only want to prove that “journalists are lying” but also “control these lies by contrasting them with a range of alternative myths and by using certain words in a way which changes the meaning of it which in turn will be adopted by the press” (Maffei 2001). This also includes the fact that the counter-public sphere is permanently moving. In quite contrast to *Attac* highly standardised structures are avoided.<sup>10</sup>

Should this phenomenon be viewed as a type of the initially described “sovereign medium,” or it is rather constricted to alternative and movement-owned media as is the case with *Attac*? Undoubtedly artistic means are applied which, however, are judged according to their usability for issues of political subversion. However, it is questionable whether it can be assigned to new media. After all, in the project totally different media come into use and even more important, the creation and refurbishment of the texts is not taking place by making use of the specific attributes of the Internet. Yet, the fact is typically that no manifest product has to exist since action is the product itself. Its methodology seems to refer to an artistic context, however, is then being applied outside the artistic context. Similar subversive strategies can be seen in projects as e.g. *Adbuster* ([www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)), *RTMark* ([www.rtmk.com](http://www.rtmk.com)) or *Deportation Class* ([www.deportation-class.com](http://www.deportation-class.com)). Mass media reporting has a key function in all of these projects. On the one hand, *Luther Blissett*

needs even more journalistic publicity than *Attac* to become popular on the other hand, it needs medial templates which can be alienated in the sense of the project.

## Conclusion

The integration of Europe could gain a new momentum with the counter-public spheres which revive a paralysed public in many ways, mostly indirectly by building a media based form of collective identity throughout Europe. Counter-public spheres, such as *Attac* and *Luther Blissett* basically consist – to different degrees – of alternative media content, alternative media practice and strategy. They are also important in generating collective identities, which increase possibilities for political democracy.

Because of its dynamic and context-bound identity counter-public spheres still remain diffuse. As the examples of *Attac* and *Luther Blissett* show, the distinction between the alternative, movement-owned media and sovereign media is only theoretical. In practice often a mixture of these forms occurs. Due to the characteristics of the new media the boundary between internal and external publics is being blurred. Analysing this case from a communication point of view, media ties have to be observed due to these features both within the counter-public spheres and to the outside. In the case of *Attac* in concrete terms this means: How do the critics of globalisation assure themselves within *Attac* and how does this communication process function to the outside which mainly means medially transmitted through broadcasting or journalistic reporting? Further research on the specific democratic potential of counter-public spheres is necessary. Collective identities and ways of participation on the part of the citizens explored in this work are only one possible indicator. New Media play a key role in the relation of counter-public spheres and democracy. Being present on the Internet as well as the use of new media has meanwhile become a matter of course not only for the established agents of the public sphere but also for the non-established political agents of the counter-public spheres. As a consequence, new media are gaining an ever-increasing momentum in the field of political communication. In general, new media have an impact on democracy, on the public sphere, and on counter-public spheres on three levels: on a microscopic level with the use and reception of the Internet by individual citizens, as well as on the mesoscopic level with the use of the Internet by single agents or organisations like *Attac* or *Luther Blissett*. The impact on the aggregate social system (macroscopic level) has not been discussed in the course of this article. Downey and Fenton are right when they point out that “the relationship between new media, counter-public spheres and the public sphere may become central to questions of democracy and legitimacy in coming years” (2003, 199-200). However, the research agenda has to be centrally amplified: How are these relations concretely shaped? This article delivers a first answer.

It is plausible to assume that also the dominant mass media will profit from the characteristics of new media (e.g. the possibilities of inquiry and presentation) to gain more influence on the public agenda and become more resistant against the influences of counter-public spheres. One also should not forget the types of undemocratic counter-public spheres. Radical networks can represent a risk for deliberative democracy. The two examples discussed in the article illustrate types of left-wing alternative counter-publics, but there are also many conservative and

right-wing-extremist projects, mostly on the Internet. These pages are often well designed and well linked. The political openness of counter-publics can be exemplified with the attempt of Polish right-wing extremists to undermine singular local groups of *Attac* (<http://www.telepolis.de/deutsch/inhalt/co/15550/1.html>). Similarly to the US-American “National Information Infrastructure Project,” such examples indicate that communication policy and regulation have to be activated in order to stimulate a vibrant public sphere.

## Notes:

1. This list is not exhaustive, but could be continued as one pleases.
2. The (often contradictory) descriptive features of alternative media are discussed in Atton (2002) and Weichler (1987). For this report I refrain from exhaustive historical classification of alternative media.
3. Not only non-government organisations (NGOs) but also NSMs and in a broader sense other forms of collective identities can be counted as actors of counter-public. For this report I limit myself to two examples from the sphere of globalisation criticism.
4. Dahlgren refers to the fact that “the kinds of interaction [in the Internet] taking place can only to a small degree be considered manifestations of the public sphere; democratic deliberation is completely overshadowed by consumerism, entertainment, non-political networking, and chat, etc.” (2004). Habermas even goes a step further and states that “electronic mass communication produces territorially separated and segmented publics worldwide, global village communities or islands of communication with which the public awareness is not at all risen but shattered hopelessly (1995).
5. Kahn and Kellner 2004 offer an overview of innovative forms of media activism and emancipatory uses of media beyond the Internet (Smart Mobs etc.).
6. The then homepage – available at: <http://www.oltnerbuendnis.ch/> – can currently be bought as a domain.
7. More information available at: <http://www.attac.de/interna/selbstverstaendnis011101.pdf>.
8. The actually artistic concept can be attributed to the situationists, but in the context of *Luther Blissett* belongs, along with other subversive strategies, to the arsenal of the so called “communication guerrilla.”
10. *Luther Blissett*’s activists are currently known alias *Wu Ming*, which is Chinese for anonymous or “without a name.”

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