

**UNIVERSITY OF OSLO**  
**Department of Informatics**

**Public deliberation  
on the Web:**

A Habermasian inquiry  
into online discourse

Hovedfag Thesis

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# **Für Mema**

In ewiger Liebe  
und Dankbarkeit



## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Oslo, August 2004  
*Simon R. B. Berdal*

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<sup>1</sup> Concepts assigned with an asterisk (\*) are explained in Appendix 1.





## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates three major Web forums, namely the *Spiegel Online Forum* (SOF), *Debattcentralen* (DC) and *The Guardian Unlimited Talk* (GUT). Within the conceptual frameworks of Actor-Network Theory and Habermasian terminology, the investigation is informed by three separate research questions. The first and second take up Habermas' strict criteria of the Ideal Speech Situation (ISS), and ask to what extent the given forums live up to its ideals. The third one concerns public opinion formation, and asks to what extent the strength of the better argument may transmit from Web forums to decision-making institutions of our societies (like parliaments and governments). Thus, the overall question unveils itself: To what extent, do Web forums in general, and the three selected forums in particular, support public debate that is free from coercion? Evidence suggests that Web forums do promote and facilitate democratic deliberation, although not entirely without being exposed to coercion.

## **KEYWORDS**

Information Systems, IS, Information and Communication Technology, ICT, Computer Mediated Communication, CMC, Actor Network Theory, ANT, Deliberative Democracy, Discourse, Web Forums, Ideal Speech Situation, Habermas, Critical Theory, Philosophy, Political Science

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The last decade has witnessed an overwhelming increase in global Internet penetration, accompanied by a growing public awareness of the Internet's socio-political potential. These trajectories have raised a multitude of new challenging questions for Information Systems (IS\*) researchers. How, for instance, do technologies of the Internet affect and facilitate social intercourse, public will-formation and political control? This thesis investigates a subset of such issues, which, in particular, concern deliberative democracy\* and debate forums on the World Wide Web (the Web).

### **1.1 Motivation and Background**

One of the most continuous efforts of human kind is building shared understanding and refining common knowledge. Since the dawn of abstract thought, we have strived to understand ourselves and our surroundings, weigh our ideas in the light of others', and make informed decisions based upon collectively accumulated pools of intelligence and wisdom.

Much has changed since the early philosophers pondered the elements of nature. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (1450) revolutionised both the accumulation and distribution of ideas, and became one of the essential preconditions - if not even a fundamental initiating force - to the Enlightenment movement. Today, we witness how the Internet is propelling us into a new information era (Castells 2001). Never before has communication and access to others' ideas been easier or more effective.

As we strive to keep an overview in the modern excess of data, our attention is increasingly shifting from accumulation towards the management of it. Reliability and validity of information are natural prerequisites to rational involvement of opinion and informed decision making. Hence, to assure quality and legitimacy of any decision or claim, it is commonly conceived as a fundamental precondition to expose its underlying premises to public scrutiny and open critique. Reflexive and dialectic forums of free discourse are thus essential ingredients in the cultivation of inter-subjective understanding and decision making. It is when the tacit foundations of our thoughts are forced into the open by explicit articulations, and exposed to the critical evaluation of others, that we may understand ourselves and recognize why we think as we do. It is when our arguments meet counter-arguments that we may defy ignorance, self-deception and delusions, and thus claim legitimacy in the light of others' free consent.

The Internet has over a short time evolved into an impressive tool for communicative action\*. It has turned into a semi-organised sphere consisting of numerous sub-spheres, both public and private, where civic deliberation seems to flourish. Although online debate forums are rather recent phenomena, they have already been vividly discussed and studied by scholars of various academic disciplines (such as sociology, anthropology, informatics and political science). Within IS\* in particular, they have become subject to considerable scrutiny and intellectual debate (e.g.: Donath 2002, Herring et al. 2002). Even when matched up against the concept of deliberative democracy\*, which is of fundamental relevance to this thesis, there are several others that have trodden up a path before me (e.g. Klein 1999, Ranerup 1999). This path highlights the interdisciplinary nature of IS\*

research, as it naturally crosses the boundaries of both philosophy and political science. Within the interdisciplinary crossing of IS\*, philosophy and political science, the conceptual framework of one contemporary academic theory and theorist stands out as particularly relevant and fertile - namely that of critical (social) theory and its foremost advocate, Jürgen Habermas. Like others before me (e.g. Ó Baoill 2000, Heng & de Moor 2003), I too apply a Habermasian perspective to study the socio-technical aspects of online deliberation. As a complementary supplement, I also integrate perspectives provided by Actor-Network Theory (ANT), to enhance my analytical and descriptive apparatus of Web forums. Thus, I seek to incorporate notions relevant to deliberative democracy\*, as originally conceived by Habermas in a non-Internet context, with contemporary socio-technical conditions that may influence civic processes of democracy.





## 1.2 Problem Definition and Structure of the thesis

The objective of this thesis is to explore and analyse the nature of debate forums on the Web, seen in relation to concepts of deliberative democracy\*. Strictly defined, the thesis aims to shed light on the following three sets of questions:

1. Ideal Speech Situation\*: To what extent do structures of given Web forums facilitate free discourse, measured against Habermas' strict criteria of the Ideal Speech Situation\* (ISS)? Seen in context of deliberative\* democracy\*, how may online Web forums further approximate the ISS, to enhance their civic potentials?
2. Participation and access: As an elaboration of the previous point, to what extent does the Web - and the given forums in particular - support free access and participation for all classes of society?
3. Public will formation: Are given Web forums connected to other public arenas, so that the impact of communicative action\* from here may propagate towards the decision making cores of societies? Thus, may the unforced force of the better argument persist from Web forum to parliament?

In my pursuit for relevant answers, I study three Web forums that all are connected to online newspapers. These are, namely, the *Spiegel Online Forum* (Spiegel Online), *The Guardian Unlimited Talk* (Guardian Unlimited) and *Debattcentralen* (Aftenposten Nettutgaven). For background details on this particular selection, please refer to the Methods chapter (3).

This thesis is divided into three main parts: Theoretical foundations (chapter 2), Methods (chapter 3), and Analysis (chapter 4). In chapter 2, I start off by exploring the general implications of Information and Communication Technologies\* (ICTs) on human society, with particular focus on how technical innovations provide us with new frameworks for communication and public deliberation. Consequently, I introduce some relevant ANT terminology, and illustrate how it may help in the conceptualisation and analysis of Web forums. Further, I discuss relevant Habermasian concepts, such as the *Public Sphere*, *Discourse Ethics* and *Communicative Action*. With the theoretical framework in place, I then seek to establish and clarify its relations to online discourse and deliberative democracy\*.

The second part (chapter 3: Methods) opens with a description and justification of the underlying epistemology, critical theory, on which this research is based. Consequently, it gives a detailed account of my empirical inquiry - consisting of online surveys, interviews and observations - related to the named Web forums.

Part three (chapter 4) consists of an analytical evaluation of my empirical findings, in relation the three research questions outlined in this chapter. With respect to questions 1 and 2, I discuss some of the limitations with the given forums, when measured against Habermas' Ideal Speech Situation\*. With respect to question 3, I discuss the issues of public will formation, that is, the degree to which the "unforced force of the better argument" may proliferate into decision making institutions of our societies.

## **2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: TECHNOLOGY AND DISCOURSE WITHIN A DEMOCRATIC FRAMEWORK**

In this chapter, I introduce and discuss the concepts that provide the theoretical foundations of the thesis. I open with a prologue on the historical idea of public discourse, and the intrinsic role that civic deliberation plays within democratic societies (2.1). Next, I illustrate the kind of wide-ranging implications the introduction of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs\*) may have on human societies, seen as a historical parallel to the rise of the Internet (2.2). I then continue with a general discussion on the use of ICTs\*, and the inherent nature(s) of technological artefacts (2.3). This lays the ground for the introduction to relevant Actor-Network Theory (ANT) terminology, with a following reflection on how ANT relates to the problem domain (2.4). Subsequently, I introduce the reader to Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School (2.5), before I outline and discuss key Habermasian concepts with relevance to the thesis (2.6). In the concluding part of this chapter (2.7), I integrate the different theoretical strands, and relate them to relevant aspects of democratic deliberation and the Internet.



## 2.1 The historical idea of public discourse

Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day.

Thomas Jefferson, 1816

The idea of public discourse as a cornerstone of democracy is about as old as the idea of democracy itself. In the fourth century BC, the orator and statesman Pericles recognised discussion amongst the citizens of the polis as an "indispensable preliminary" to political action (Thucydides in Ravich and Thernstrom 1992:3). Other political thinkers, like Socrates, Aristotle, Rousseau, J.S. Mill, amongst many others, have shared and advocated similar understandings. Central in elaborations on civic discourse and democracy are typically notions like "informed and legitimate decision making", cultivation of a "deliberative political culture", "consensus building", "free speech" and "Enlightenment".

The common understanding of public discourse as an intrinsic foundation of modern democracy has been firmly engraved as imperatives of constitutions, political traditions and law. One of the most cited examples is probably the US constitution, whose "founding fathers" believed that only a framework of deliberative discussion could give the people true sovereignty, whilst at the same time making it subject to its collective pool of laws. As the US Supreme Court Justice, Louis D. Brandeis observed (quoted in Glendon 1991:171):

Those who won our independence believed that the final end of the state was to make men free to develop their faculties; and that in its government the deliberative forces should prevail over the arbitrary. ... They believed that ... the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people; that public discussion is a political duty; and that this should be a fundamental principle of ... government.

Thus, the first amendment to the US constitution, which protects and promotes freedom of expression, has had far-reaching implications for both the governing and governed - not only within the US, but all around the world.

Although legal frameworks, institutions and traditions for civic discourse persist in modern democracies, many other factors have radically changed. Constant introductions of new ICTs\* have had considerable influence on both shape and scope of public deliberation. The following section provides an example of just that.

## 2.2 The impact of new ICTs

Whilst man works upon ... nature and changes it, he changes at the same time his own nature...

Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*

Technological advances in communications have significant implications on the public debate. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (1450) is a classic example of how innovation can trigger cascades of changes within societies. The scientific revolution, which would later challenge the entrenched "truths" espoused by the Church, was largely a consequence of print technology (Ainsworth 1998). The scientific principle of repeatability - the impartial verification of experimental results - grew out of a rapid and broad dissemination of scientific insights and discoveries that print allowed. As the production of scientific knowledge accelerated, printed exchange of ideas gave rise to a scientific community in which geographical distance became a decreasing constraint. The dispersed accumulation of ideas, which came as a direct result of the printing press, made it possible to further systematise methodologies and to add sophistication to the development of rational thought. As readily available books helped to expand the collective body of knowledge, new traditions of indexing and cross-referencing emerged as ways of managing volumes of information and of innovatively associating seemingly unrelated ideas.

Innovations in the accessibility of knowledge and the structure of human thought that followed with the rise of print also influenced the domains of art, literature, philosophy and politics. The explosive growth in innovations that characterised the Renaissance was amplified, if not even initiated, by the printing press. Print technology facilitated a communications revolution that reached deep into human modes of thought and social interaction. It infused Western culture with new principles of standardisation, verifiability and communication, which originates from one source and then circulates amongst many geographically dispersed receivers. As illustrated by the dramatic reform in religious thought and scientific inquiry, print innovations helped to bring about sharp challenges to institutional control (e.g., to the Church: Martin Luther, 1483-1546; to the socio-political establishment: Karl Marx, 1818-1883). It facilitated a new focus on fixed, verifiable truth, and on the individual ability and right to choose one's own intellectual and religious conviction (e.g. John Locke, 1632-1704).

Throughout the last century, we have experienced the introduction and expansion of several new ICTs\*, like the mass radio, television, new telephone applications, and now, of course, the Internet and the Personal Computer (PC). It is argued by many (e.g. Dewar 2000) that Computer Mediated Communication (CMC\*), primarily facilitated by Internet technologies, will trigger new cascades of change of similar magnitude and significance as those enabled by the printing press. How exactly these changes will unfold, however, is highly dependent on how we *apply* the new technologies. Also, the very *nature(s)* of the still evolving technologies may have significant influence on such changes. These issues are further elaborated in sections 2.3 and 2.4.



### 2.3 Media use and the intrinsic nature of technological artefacts

As much as ICTs\* have the potential to be emancipating, they may also be used as tools of repression and control. Already before the Third Reich turned broadcasting into a mass-propaganda machinery<sup>1</sup>, Bertholt Brecht promoted the opposing, emancipating potential of the radio. Around 1930, he published a series of texts, which today are known as the *Radiotheorie* (Brecht 1927-1932). Rather than being a one-way centralised distribution channel, he argued that radio should be used as a communication tool by and for the *Volk*. Brecht's ideal was of radio serving as a communication channel, where listeners were not only recipients but also included as active participants.

It was not until Hans Magnus Enzensberger revitalised Brecht's *Radiotheorie* in 1970, that it got the public attention it deserved. In *Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien*, which very much builds on Brecht's work, Enzensberger (1970:173) summarises attributes of repressive vs. emancipatory media use as follows:

Repressive media use	Emancipatory media use
Centrally controlled program	Decentralised programmes
One transmitter, many receivers	Every receiver is a potential transmitter
Immobilisation of isolated individuals	Mobilisation of the masses
Passive consumer behaviour	Interaction of participants, feedback
Depoliticisation process	Political learning process
Production by specialists	Collective production
Control by owners or bureaucrats	Social control through self-organisation

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<sup>1</sup>Goebbels, in March of 1933 (only a few days after the establishment of the Reich-Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda) openly described his ideal of a press that acts like a "finely tuned piano, on which the government can play" (Wulf 1983:64 f., my translation).

Enzensberger's distinction between repressive and emancipatory media use, off course, stretches much further than just to radio technology - it virtually covers any form of ICT\*. However, it is important to distinguish between the fundamental *nature(s)* of a given ICT\* and the use of it. While one may organise the use of a technology in many different ways, the de facto degree of choice is heavily influenced by its given characteristics. Whether or not such characteristics are intentionally engraved, I argue that they amount up to substantial imperatives of use - thus themselves becoming excellent candidates for classification along a repressive-emancipatory axis. If we, for example, compare the TV of today to the Internet, we observe that the TV provides far fewer access points for active participation than the Internet does: While the TV generally favours few-to-many broadcasting, the Internet rather invites many-to-many interaction.

As on the macro level, we may observe the same phenomenon on a lower plane: Different Internet protocols facilitate different types of use, and affect a multitude of applications within their respective technical domains. Thus, interacting and inter-dependent technologies influence each other, and to a certain degree, also affect our perception and use of them. Virtual artefacts of the Web (such as online debate forums) build upon particular Internet protocols, scripting and programming languages, concepts of information design, and unambiguous rules of use - all of which has some "say" in whether and how we finally take them into use. A useful conceptual vehicle to study how embedded features of technological artefacts may influence their own application is the subject of the following subchapter, on Actor-Network Theory.

## 2.4 Actor-Network Theory terminology

For the analysis and description of socio-technical ensembles, I (as many others, e.g. Tatnall 2003) find it useful to borrow some key assumptions and terminology from Actor-Network Theory (ANT). I have no ambitions to provide a full introduction to ANT here, but, rather, explain its relevant concepts and how I understand them<sup>2</sup>.

Two concepts are of particular relevance to this thesis: *inscription* (Akrich 1992; Akrich and Latour 1992) and *translation* (Callon 1991; Latour 1987). *Inscription* refers to the way technical artefacts embody patterns of use: "Technical objects thus simultaneously embody and measure a set of relations between heterogeneous elements" (Akrich 1992: 205, in Hanseth and Monteiro 1998). As Hanseth and Moneiro further explain:

The term inscription might sound somewhat deterministic by suggesting that action is inscribed, grafted or hard wired into an artefact. This, however, is a misinterpretation. Balancing the tight rope between, on the one hand, an objectivistic stance where artefacts determine the use and, on the other hand, a subjectivistic stance holding that an artefact is always interpreted and appropriated flexibly, the notion of inscription may be used to describe how concrete anticipations and restrictions of future patterns of use are involved in the development and use of technology.

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<sup>2</sup> Particularly interested readers are encouraged to follow the references provided in this chapter

*Translation* is the process of continuous negotiations within a network of inter-related actors (that is, an *actor-network*), where aligning interests result in manifestations of "...ordering effects such as devices, agents, institutions, or organizations" (Law 1992: 366, in Hanseth and Monteiro 1998). The input of the translation (such as anticipations or interests) is thereby converted into another state, for which the resulting inscribed entity (which may be everything from a work practice or software to physical piece of technology) is to serve as its executive. The inscription includes *programs of action* for the end-users, by defining roles to be played by users and the technological artefact. The success of the translation depends on the strength of the inscription, or sum of inscriptions, and the resistance, or *anti-programs*, towards the inscribed imperatives. A classic example is that of a hotel manager who attaches weights to keys to persuade guests to leave their keys at the reception desk on leaving (Latour 1991). Thereby, the inscribing actor is making "assumptions about what competencies are required by the users as well as the system (Latour 1991). In ANT terminology, she [the actor] delegates roles and competencies to the components of the socio-technical network, including users as well as the components of the system. By inscribing programs of action into a piece of technology, the technology becomes an actor [or *actant*<sup>3</sup>], imposing its inscribed program of action on its users" (Hanseth and Monteiro 1998).

In the case of this thesis' problem domain - Web forums - the concepts of inscription and translation are highly relevant to understand and depict the characteristics that influence the online discourse - such as functional structures and given rules of use. It is, in this context, important to understand the complexity found in most actor-networks - like Web forums.

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<sup>3</sup> *actant* is a term that covers both humans and artefacts

The number of involved *actants* is immense, and the different cause-effect relations can be based on everything from rational intentions, aligning power-structures and compromises, to random accidents and human emotions. Thus, the programs of use within a given Web forum may draw their roots from many dispersed *actants*, of which only some are readily available or even traceable. As Monteiro (2000:244) writes:

To make sense of such a complex context, it is absolutely essential to simplify, that is, collapse complexity by zooming out, by treating comprehensive actor-networks as simple actants. Hence, we talk about the interests of whole organizations, governmental agencies etc. even though it is clear that this is but a short-hand.

Accordingly, I find it useful to talk about "the moderator\* of a forum" as one entity, while it may, in fact, be constituted by a number of people, who follow orders from above, and use technical enhancers (e.g. automation scripts) to employ their will. The level of "zooming out" is naturally given by the extent of information I have at hand, and the amount of complexity that seems reasonable to handle.



## 2.5 Introducing Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School

Jürgen Habermas, born in 1929, is probably the most prominent and widely cited German philosopher of our time. He is recognised worldwide as one of the most productive contributors to contemporary philosophy and the social sciences. His work draws upon a variety of disciplines, and has equally returned new impulses back to them: psychology, sociology, political science and, of course, philosophy.

Habermas is known for his background in the Frankfurt School, a widely used reference to the philosophy that sprung out of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute of Social Research) in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Founded in 1923, the institute's theoretical foundations, which from the start were firmly grounded in a new line of non-dogmatic Marxian thought (namely critical theory), were laid by its earliest members, such as Friedrich Pollock, Leo Löwenthal, Carl Grünberg (first Director), Max Horkheimer (second Director), Henryk Grossmann, Karl August Wittfogel, Franz Borkenau, and Julian Gumperz. From around 1930, others like Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Karl Landauer, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, A.R.L. Gurland, Paul Massing, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Mirra Komarovsky, among many others, were affiliated with the institute. These are often referred to as the first generation of the Frankfurt School. A second generation, which began to develop in the 1960s, with Jürgen Habermas as the leading figure, includes Alfred Schmidt, Oskar Negt, Albrecht Wellmer, and Karl-Otto Apel. While a further description of the Frankfurt School regrettably is outside the scope of this thesis, it should be recognized as an influential and still thriving school of thought, which Habermas represents and draws his roots from.





## 2.6 Habermas' vocabulary

Habermas' work is widely known as complex, extensive and, by most standards, rather hard to digest. It consists of a large number of books and articles, of which the latest published, to some extent, amend the contents of previous works. Although Habermas writes in German, which also happens to be my mother tongue, I must admit that I primarily base my research and understanding on English translations. Partly so, because I find it burdensome to process his heavy "original" academic language (which seems to become considerably lighter through translation), and partly because it is noticeably less demanding to read the same language as one writes in. Hence, to clarify my "English understanding" of Habermas' work, I now introduce and discuss some of Habermas' most central and relevant concepts.

### 2.6.1 The Public Sphere

Perhaps *the* most central of Habermas' concepts is that of the Public Sphere, which originates from his' *Habilitationsschrift* from 1962, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (hereafter referred to as *Structural Transformation*). This work gives a historical-sociological account of the creation, brief flourishing, and demise of a public sphere based on rational-critical debate and discussion. Habermas stipulates that, due to specific historical circumstances, a new civic society emerged in the eighteenth century. Driven by a need for open commercial arenas where news and matters of common concern could be freely exchanged and discussed - accompanied by growing rates of literacy, accessibility to literature, and a new kind of critical journalism - a separate domain from

ruling authorities started to evolve across Europe. "In its clash with the arcane and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state, the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented *before* the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse *by* the people" (original emphasis, Habermas 1989:xi).

In his historical analysis, Habermas points out three so-called "institutional criteria" as preconditions for the emergence of the new public sphere. The discursive arenas, such as Britain's coffee houses, France's *salons* and Germany's *Tischgesellschaften* "may have differed in the size and compositions of their publics, the style of their proceedings, the climate of their debates, and their topical orientations", but "they all organized discussion among people that tended to be ongoing; hence they had a number of institutional criteria in common" (ibid, 36 ff.):

1. Disregard of status: Preservation of "a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. [...] Not that this idea of the public was actually realized in earnest in the coffee houses, *salons*, and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim. If not realized, it was at least consequential." (loc.cit.)

2. Domain of common concern: "... discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned. The domain of 'common concern' which was the object of public critical attention remained a preserve in which church and state authorities had the monopoly of interpretation. [...] The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority." (loc.cit.)
  
3. Inclusivity: "However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who - insofar they were propertied and educated - as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion. The issues discussed became 'general' not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to *be able* to participate. [...] Wherever the public established itself institutionally as a stable group of discussants, it did not equate itself with *the* public but at most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name, perhaps even as its educator - the new form of bourgeois representation" (original emphasis, loc.cit.).

In short, these "institutional criteria" state that 1) status was disregarded altogether, 2) that the domain of discourse was that of "common concern", and that 3) members of all levels of society were included.

Although *Structural Transformation* was (and is) one of the most influential works in contemporary German philosophy and political science, it took 27 years until an English version appeared on the market (1989). Based on a conference on the occasion of the English translation, at which Habermas himself attended, Calhoun (1992) edited *Habermas and the Public Sphere* - a thorough dissection of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere by scholars from various academic disciplines. The core criticism at the conference was directed towards the above stated "institutional criteria":

1. Hegemonic dominance and exclusion: In *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, Nancy Fraser (1992) revisits Habermas' historical description of the public sphere, and confronts it with "recent revisionist historiography" (Fraser in Calhoun, 109 ff.). She refers to other scholars, like Joan Landers, Mary Ryan and Geoff Eley, when she argues that the bourgeois public sphere was in fact constituted by a "number of significant exclusions." In contrast to Habermas' assertions on disregard of status, and inclusivity, Fraser claims that the bourgeois public sphere discriminated against women and lower social strata of society: "... this network of clubs and associations - philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural - was anything but accessible to everyone. On the contrary, it was the arena, the training ground and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who were coming to see themselves as a "universal class" and preparing to assert their fitness to govern." Thus, she stipulates a hegemonic tendency of the

male bourgeois public sphere, which dominated at the cost of alternative publics (for example by gender, social status, ethnicity and property ownership), thereby averting other groups from articulating their particular concerns.

From my limited perspective of a "non-historian", I still find this assessment highly plausible: Habermas' somewhat idealised bourgeois public sphere does indeed seem to contain limitations, as it apparently overstates the aspects of inclusivity and disregard of status. Even so, there are further, unmentioned "exclusion factors" that come to mind - such as geographical locality, age and education (which may be correlated with the previously mentioned factors - like gender and education). How, for example, should a farmer from a remote village have been able to regularly visit a salon of the eighteenth century (which probably would be found in an urban scene)? Or, how could someone without education have been able to overcome the relative gap of conceptual understanding and vocabulary when attempting to join a complicated debate? Even if one is exceptionally bright and well-educated, would someone of young age have been socially permitted to draw an elder's argument into doubt, or even able to access a sophisticated discourse arena? Antoni Gramsci would, probably, have made a case in labelling this as a primary example of "cultural hegemony".

2. Bracketing of inequalities: Fraser (ibid: 118 ff.) makes us recall "that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere requires bracketing inequalities of status": The "public sphere was to be an arena in which interlocutors would set aside such characteristics as difference in birth and fortune and speak to one another *as if* they were social and economic peers" (my emphasis). Fraser refers to feminist research by Jane Mansbridge, which notes several relevant "...ways in which deliberation can serve as a mask for domination..." Consequently, she argues that "...such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates." Thus, she concludes: "In most cases it would be more appropriate to *unbracket* inequalities in the sense of explicitly thematizing them - a point that accords with the spirit of Habermas's later communicative ethics" (original emphasis).

Again, Fraser seems to have a pertinent point: By speaking to one another *as if* being peers, important aspects of de facto inequalities are systematically ignored. This lays the ground for some to take advantage of differences, without even risking such issues to be put on the agenda (because, "officially", there are no inequalities to talk about). Thus, I agree with Fraser in that it would be more appropriate, in most cases, to explicitly articulate inequalities - so that one may relate to them, and, if possible, take appropriate steps to bridge them. As Fraser notes, Habermas himself takes a similar route in his later writing.

3. The public sphere (singular vs. plural): In chapter four (*Equality, Diversity and Multiple Publics*), Fraser (ibid, 121 ff.) discusses what she interprets as Habermas' normative assumption of "the institutional confinement of public life to a single, overarching public sphere" as a "a positive and desirable state of affairs, whereas the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics represents a departure from [...] democracy"<sup>4</sup>. Fraser argues, in disagreement with her understanding of Habermas, that "the ideal of participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public."

Without speculating on Habermas' supposed normative assumptions, I find it hard to disagree with Fraser's idea that one single "overarching public sphere" has no intrinsic preference to a "multiplicity of publics". Whatever Habermas might have assumed around 1962, he has been quite unambiguous thirty years later (Habermas in Calhoun 1992: 426 ff.): "The exclusion of the culturally and politically mobilized lower strata entails a pluralization of the public sphere in the very process of its emergence. Next to, and interlocked with, the hegemonic public sphere, a plebeian one assumes shape. [...] This culture of the common people apparently was by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counterproject to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines." Thereby, Habermas not only addresses the aspects of plural vs. singular of public sphere(s), but also those of dominance and exclusion.

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<sup>4</sup> See section 1.5.2 for further understanding of this claim

4. The problematic definition of "common concern": Nancy Fraser (ibid, 128 ff.) points out that "there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries" between matters that are generally conceived as private, and ones we typically label as public (and which thus are of "common concern"). As an example, she refers to the historic shift in the general conception of domestic violence, from previously being a matter of primarily private concern, to now generally being accepted as a common one: "Eventually, after sustained discursive contestation we succeeded in *making* it a common concern" (original emphasis). Consequently, "even after women and workers have been formally licensed to participate, their participation may be hedged by conceptions of economic and domestic privacy that delimit the scope of debate. These notions, therefore, are vehicles through which gender and class disadvantages may continue to operate subtextually and informally, even after explicit, formal restrictions have been rescinded" (loc.cit.).

Yet again, Fraser seems to have a point. Obviously, there is no a priori definition of what a "common concern" entails. Even with a limited knowledge of history, most people would agree that the public agenda has changed radically over time, often as a result of hard-fought struggles for attention (e.g. the effort by the militant suffragettes to get heard on women's deficient rights to vote).



5. Material support for participation: Based on her conclusion that "participatory parity is essential to a democratic public sphere and that rough socioeconomic equality is a precondition of participatory parity", Fraser (ibid, 133 ff.) claims that "some form of politically regulated economic reorganization and redistribution is needed to achieve that end." Thus, normatively and ideally, these inequalities should be sought eliminated, rather than just being bracketed or explicitly articulated (see point 2).

Purely descriptively, I agree with Fraser in that "rough socioeconomic equality is a precondition of participatory parity", which again is "essential to a democratic public sphere". However, one should be careful when linking the descriptive with the normative. Fraser (loc.cit.) concludes that "laissez-faire capitalism does not foster socioeconomic equality", in which she probably is right. Now, given that democratic public spheres hold intrinsic (or even instrumental) value, and the above premises are valid, it indeed seems correct to suggest that "some form of politically regulated economic reorganization and redistribution is needed". Fraser hereby shifts the focus towards an ideal post-bourgeois, democratic public sphere(s), thereby making the differences to Habermas historical account of the bourgeois (eighteenth century Europe) one(s) apparent<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Please see section 2.6.5 for further elaborations on modern, democratic publics.

As Seyla Benhabib (1992: 73) puts it, the "art of making distinctions is always a difficult and risky undertaking". By that, I refer to Habermas' early (1962) account of the bourgeois public sphere, and the much later critique (1992) based on "recent revisionist historiography". The lines Habermas initially drew, based on available knowledge of the 1960's, were apparently overdue for peer review in the early 1990's. The historian Geoff Eley, who has critically assessed Habermas' work, notes the following (Calhoun 1992: 423): "...it is striking to see how securely and even imaginatively the argument is historically grounded, given the thinness of the literature available at the time". Habermas himself writes (ibid: 421): "Rereading this book after almost thirty years, I was initially tempted to make changes, eliminate passages, and make emendations." Although Habermas never refashioned his book, much of the critique was by then already implicitly pre-empted, or at least addressed, by some of his later work. Before I introduce any concepts drawing from his later work, however, I wish to introduce some key concepts from the still unmentioned second half of the *Structural Transformation*.

#### **2.6.2 The decline of the bourgeois public sphere and the system / lifeworld distinction.**

In the second part of the *Structural Transformation*, Habermas argues that a systemic invasion of the bourgeois public sphere began in the late 19th century. Private interests gained political roles, while powerful corporations increasingly came to control and manipulate the state and media. Meanwhile, the state began to play a stronger role in the private realm, thus corroding the previously clear distinction between state and civic society.

As the public sphere declined, citizens were gradually reduced to passive clients, dedicating their attention more to consumption and private concerns than to issues of the public. In the altered public sphere of welfare state capitalism, public opinion is increasingly administered by political, economic, and media elites. According to Habermas (1989: 176), the "public was largely relieved of" its tasks "by other institutions: on the one hand associations in which collectively organized private interests directly attempted to take on the form of political agency; on the other hand by parties which, fused with the organs of public authority, established themselves, as it were, above the public whose instruments they once were" (original emphasis). Further (loc.cit.), "[t]he process of the politically relevant exercise and equilibration of power now takes place directly between the private bureaucracies, special interest associations, parties, and public administration. The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute its acclamation."

Habermas thereby describes a transition from the liberal public sphere, which originated in the Enlightenment movement, the American and French Revolution, into the current era, which he labels as "welfare state capitalism and mass democracy." In it, the public sphere is dominated by the media and special interests. This historical transformation is firmly grounded in the Frankfurt School's (Horkheimer and Adorno) analysis of the culture industry, in which giant corporations take over the public sphere and transform it from a sphere of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity. Public opinion shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion, and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts: "Publicity loses its critical function in favor of a staged display; even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one can not respond by arguing but only

by identifying with them" (ibid, 206). In this context, it is interesting to note what central role Habermas gives the mass media (ibid, 188 f.):

Whereas formerly the press was able to limit itself to the transmission of the rational-critical debate of private people assembled into a public, now conversely this debate gets shaped by the mass media to begin with. In the course of the shift from a journalism of private men [...] to the public services of mass media, the sphere of the public was altered by the influx of private interests that received privileged exposure in it [...].

After thirty years, Habermas still sticks to this description, and adds (in Calhoun 1992: 437):

The public sphere, simultaneously prestructured and dominated by the mass media, developed into an arena infiltrated by power in which, by means of topic selection and topical contributions, a battle is fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flows that affect behavior while their strategic intentions are kept hidden as much as possible.

The initial bourgeois public sphere has thus, according to Habermas, fallen victim to imperatives of money and power. This tendency is, in Habermas' own terminology, commonly known as "systemic colonisation of the lifeworld". While the lifeworld (a term apparently borrowed from phenomenology) represents the inter-subjective platform of opinion- and will-formation (as culture and social relations), the system corresponds to opposing, non-linguistic, and instrumental imperatives of money and power. Hence, the lifeworld carries and maintains traditions of the community, and is the foundation of socialisation, whereas the system, in contrast, refers to seemingly "natural" forces within human society. Colonisation occurs when elements from the lifeworld get

subjected to systemic pressure (represented by governmental administration and capitalist interests), thus weakening its autonomy and ability to preserve itself. This brings us to two types of rationality that influence the respective domains of system and lifeworld.

### **2.6.3 Communicative and instrumental rationality and action**

The underlying rules of the system are governed by instrumental rationality, that is, they are determined by a need for efficiency in realising given objectives. Communicative rationality, in contrast, is reason based upon evaluation of language and statements exchanged amongst at least two actors, grounded in claims of truth (of facts), rightness (of norms) and sincerity (of actors). While instrumental rationality aims towards the realisation of a given intention, by employing predictions of cause-effect causality, the intrinsic purpose of communicative rationality is that of building inter-subjective understanding and consensus. Actions based upon these rationales are labelled correspondingly. Consequently, instrumental action is intended at effectively and efficiently reaching given goals (as, for example, downsizing workforce and outsourcing labour may be strategies for profit maximisation, which in turn is intended at "increasing shareholders' value"). Communicative action, meanwhile, is aimed at reaching common agreement and understanding of social norms, meaning and values, and on maintaining inter-personal relations within the lifeworld. "Like the lifeworld as a whole, so, too, the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action, for which the mastery of natural language suffices..."(Habermas 1996:360).

Habermas' typology of rationality and action is, of course, more complex than this - and thus regrettably outside the scope of this thesis. His major point of relevance, however, is that instrumental rationality has gained too much ground at the expense of communicative reasoning - thereby leading to a previously mentioned "systemic colonisation of the lifeworld", which again is closely interlinked with the decline of the bourgeois public sphere. It is not that instrumental reason in itself is "bad", or that there cannot be a constructive co-existence between instrumental and communicative reason. Rather, it is the relative balance between the two that is decisive. Systemic colonisation of the lifeworld occurs when instrumental rationality dislocates communicative rationality to such an extent that social agents no longer can understand or question the rules that govern their actions (similar to the better known concept of "alienation", as used by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*, and in contemporary sociology).

It is not as much Habermas' assessment of history that is interesting to us, as is the conceptual framework which it provides, and the critical peer review that comes along with it. For, although the Habermasian account of the public sphere may have had some flaws<sup>6</sup>, it does not however render its emancipatory potentials as obsolete. Similarly, even if Habermas' depiction of the declining bourgeois public sphere may be somewhat pessimistically dramatised, it does nonetheless capture some interesting conceptual angles. As we now enter the realm of ethics, the reader should be aware of how the previously mentioned critique of Habermas' "institutional criteria" is implicitly addressed by its normative ideals.

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<sup>6</sup> See chapter 2.6.1

#### 2.6.4 Discourse Ethics

With the theory of Discourse Ethics<sup>7</sup>, Habermas turns his focus on normative philosophy. Discourse Ethics are constituted by a set of universalistic and practical guidelines, by which Habermas seeks to overcome moral challenges of relativism and pluralism. It is through the *process* of open and reflexive discourse, by reaching inter-subjective understanding, that validity claims\* and decisions may reach moral authority. As Manin (1987:352) puts it:

[A] legitimate decision does not represent the will of all, but is one that results from deliberation of all. It is the process by which everyone's will is formed that confers its legitimacy on the outcome, rather than the sum of already formed wills [-in contrast to, say, some forms of rational choice theory].

Thus, the unforced force of the better argument is to prevail. But, as any claim at any time may be challenged by potentially more convincing ones, any serious discourse inhabits a natural "unresolved openness" (*Unabgeschlossenheit*).

Habermas expresses unambiguous conditions for reaching universal norms through discourse, by formulating three principles (Cavalier et al., 1999):

1. The principle of universalisation (U): "All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone's* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation). (Habermas 1990:65, original emphasis)

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<sup>7</sup> *Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification*, in Habermas 1990

2. The principle of discourse ethics (D): "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in a practical discourse*" (ibid:66, original emphasis).
  
3. Consensus can be achieved only if all participants take part in discussion freely: we cannot expect the consent of all participants "unless all affected can *freely* accept the consequences and the side effects that the *general* observance of a controversial norm can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the interests of *each individual*" (ibid:93, original emphasis).

To clarify the application of these principles, Habermas adopts the "Rules of Reason" proposed by Alexy (1990). These procedural rules are in Habermasian terminology commonly known as the criteria of the *Ideal Speech Situation* (ISS), and are restated as follows (Habermas 1990: 89 - my numeration):

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
  - 2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
  - 2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
  - 2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.
  
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2).



The reader should by now recognise how the ISS reflects shortcomings of the bourgeois public sphere, as presented in section 2.6.1: The realisation of the ISS would effectively eliminate the problems concerning hegemonic dominance and exclusion, bracketing of inequalities, the problematic definition of "common concern" (that is, the agenda), and material support for participation. However, as the name suggests, the ISS is a *set of ideals* - and therefore difficult, if not impossible, to actually implement. It is, thus, not without reason that this thesis investigates to *what extent* structures of given Web forums facilitate free discourse, measured against Habermas' strict criteria of the Ideal Speech Situation<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> As stipulated in research questions 1 and 2, chapter 1.

### 2.6.5 Deliberative Democracy and Communicative Action

Habermas' Discourse Ethics suggest clear guidelines for all types of discursive processes, where the aim is to reach inter-subjective understanding and morally binding decisions. Let us therefore consider the following definition of deliberative democracy (Cohen in Bohman and Rehg, 1997: 72):

[...] democratic association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens.

The close relation between Discourse Ethics and Deliberative Democracy should thus be intuitive: The shared pool of law is to be a result of public deliberation amongst those who will be affected by it. If we interpret the ISS\* strictly, "every subject with the competence to speak and act" is to be allowed access to the public discourse - that is, without being exposed to any type of coercion. It is therefore, maybe not surprising, that some political thinkers refer to this idea as an utter version of Utopia.

Habermas (1996: 307) states that public opinion is formed and articulated not in one singular, official meta-discourse, but in an "...open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal, social, and substantive boundaries. Within a framework guaranteed by constitutional rights, the structures of such a pluralistic public develop more or less spontaneously. The currents of public communication are channelled by mass media and flow through different publics that develop informally inside associations."

In other words, public discourse operates within a seemingly anarchic grid of overlapping publics, which are securely embedded within a framework of constitutional rights ("freedom of speech", "freedom of association" etc). According to Fraser's (1992) suggestions, Habermas now also distinguishes between *weak* and *strong* publics. Weak publics' "deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation ..." (ibid: 134). Strong publics, on the other hand, encompass both will formation *and* decision making (represented by parliaments and other discursive institutions with decision making competence or influence). Habermas writes (1996: 307 f., with original emphasis):

On account of its anarchic structure, the general public sphere is, on the one hand, more vulnerable to the repressive and exclusionary effects of unequally distributed social power, structural violence, and systematically distorted communication than are the institutionalized public spheres of parliamentary bodies. On the other hand, it has the advantage of a medium of *unrestricted* communication. Here new problem situations can be perceived more sensitively, discourses aimed at achieving self-understanding can be conducted more widely and expressively, collective identities and need interpretations can be articulated with fewer compulsions than is the case in procedurally regulated public spheres.

Weak publics thus serve as "sensors", identifying and articulating new issues that derive from the lifeworld. Strong publics, on their hand, filter issues from the weak ones, and process them within their discursive decision-making apparatuses. The public "sluices" new issues towards, and into, the state machinery. Habermas thereby follows the "sluice model" derived by the sociologist Bernard Peters (1993), in which the political power-circuit follows a centre-periphery structure. The centre consists of formal political institutions that have direct influence on collectively binding decisions (that is, strong publics, such as

parliaments, specialist committees, ministries and political parties). The periphery encompasses the multitude of weak publics that stand in direct, or indirect, relation to the centre. Habermas (1996:356) writes:

This sociological translation of the discourse theory of democracy [Peters 1993:340f.] implies that binding decisions, to be legitimate, must be steered by communication flows that start at the periphery and pass through the sluices of democratic and constitutional procedures situated at the entrance to the parliamentary complex or the courts...

...and further (ibid:442, with original emphasis):

...the public sphere is not conceived simply as the back room of the parliamentary complex, but as the impulse-generating periphery that *surrounds* the political center: in cultivating normative reasons, it affects all parts of the political system without intending to conquer it. Passing through the channels of general elections and various forms participation, public opinions are converted into a communicative power that authorizes the legislature and legitimates regulatory agencies, while a publicly mobilized critique of judicial decisions imposes more intense-justificatory obligations on a judiciary engaged in further developing the law.

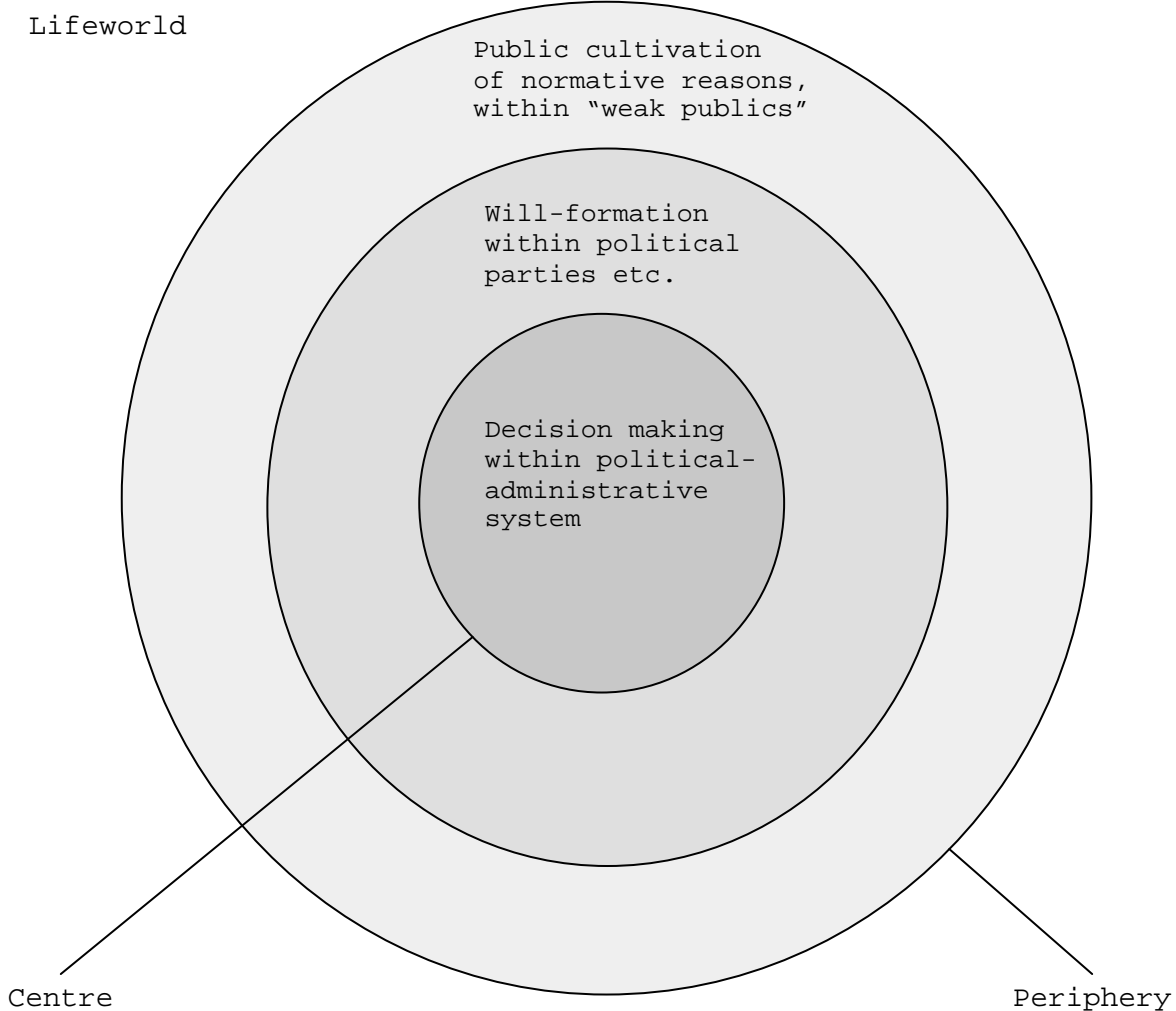
Habermas thereby picks up the thread from Cohen, with a strong focus on how legitimacy of "regulatory agencies" and their "judicial decisions" derives through "communicative power". The power builds up within the realm of the public sphere (here understood as the periphery, or sum of interlinked weak publics), which firmly surrounds the political centre. This communicative power build-up is closely related to the cultivation of "normative reasons", and should be seen in context of Discourse Ethics: It is by the unforced force of the better argument that valid normative claims crystallise, prevail and, thus, grow in strength. With this communicative power, the public "besieges the parliamentary system without

conquering it" (my translation of Eriksen and Weigård 1999: 251). But how, you may ask, is a publicly derived agenda able to cross *into* the decision making centre? What does Habermas mean by "sluices of democratic and constitutional procedures situated at the entrance to the parliamentary complex"?

For one, and maybe the most apparent, elected politicians must defend their decisions publicly, or risk their position in the next election. The state administration, indirectly, must abide to the same rules (as they are, more or less, ruled by the executive political elite, which in turn will avoid the opposition from taking over). The media plays an obviously crucial role in explicitly articulating the public voice, confronting politicians with it, and stimulating further public deliberation on issues of civic interest (that is, open debate that involves members of both the centre and periphery). The more fragmented the parliament is, the more sensitive it is likely to be to the public's voice (the competition to "please" the electorate increases, and it is more probable for the opposition to pick up and amplify critical voices that derive from the periphery).

Secondly, and perhaps less evidently, is the influence that communicative power has on will-formation - not only within the periphery - but also on individuals with access to the decision-making centre. As, for example, members of political parties also are private people, they are likely to pick up civic impulses within the public domain (arguments that seem convincing to them as individuals), and sluice them into exclusive debates within their parties. Thus, civic cultivation of "normative reason" is interlinked with will-formation within political parties and special-interest organisations (semi-political pressure groups). In consequence, "the unforced force of the better argument" may,

theoretically and plausibly, propagate all the way from peripheral publics to (and into) the centre (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Schematic drawing of the centre-periphery structure of opinion- and will-formation: New issues that derive from the lifeworld are "themastized" within the periphery. Communicative power builds up through communicative interaction, and "besieges" the centre. Issues from the periphery get attention on the political agenda, as they are sluiced towards, and into, the decision-making centre.

## **2.7 The Internet and democratic deliberation**

With central theoretical foundations of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) established, and the most fundamental Habermasian concepts in place, we are now in position to consider the Internet in relation to democratic deliberation. I start by drawing a new, enhanced centre-periphery model, with primary focus on Internet mediated communications. Consequently, I evaluate the notion of "systemic colonisation" in context of the Internet. Thereafter, I consider the notion of the "digital divide", and assess its place within the Habermasian typology. Based upon this theoretical framework, I then revisit the thesis' research questions, and lay the foundations for the upcoming empirics and analysis.

### **2.7.1 Communicative opinion- and will-formation within virtual publics of the Internet**

In supplement to what is already stated in section 2.6.5, Habermas (1996:358) writes that the main "expectations [to peripheral networks] are directed at the capacity to perceive, interpret and present society-wide problems in a way that is both attention catching and innovative." This capacity, which is so very crucial to the periphery, is itself highly dependent upon social spaces in which it can evolve. But, you may ask, are they dependent on "real" and close-by spaces, in the sense of being physically situated somewhere near you? Obviously not. As "society-wide problems" have been globalised, so have social spaces. With new ICTs\* of the Internet, the periphery has gained new ground for communicative interaction. As amendments to the traditional "centre-periphery" model, one should therefore consider several encouraging tendencies of the Internet:

1. As Internet penetration increases globally, so does the global public's ability to engage in discourse. If a given matter lacks "readily accessible interest" within the local, regional or national proximity, chances are far greater to find peer interest within (perhaps specially dedicated) virtual spaces of the Internet. Thus, *any subject* may *virtually anywhere* be articulated as one of "common concern".
  
2. As the Internet provides a certain "veil of anonymity" to its users, they may speak out more freely on controversial or "forbidden" issues, without fearing coercion (for example, when being politically incorrect or opposing an intimidating regime)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, one may say that online anonymity promotes freedom of speech and freedom of association, in a virtual sense, where it lacks in the real sense. Further, the "veil of anonymity" makes it possible for interlocutors to bypass patriarchal communication structures, which otherwise might have delimited the free access to discourse (this should be considered in context of Habermas' institutional criteria on inclusivity and disregard of status).

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<sup>9</sup> This claim needs some clarification: All Internet users leave digital footprints which, if not elaborately concealed, may be traced back to the true identity of users. In most western countries, any formal attempts to trace back such footprints (i.e. server logs) require legal justification (provided through search warrant or subpoena). It is widely assumed, though, that some countries go far in monitoring Internet traffic in the name of "national security" and the so-called "war on terror". Further, some malicious hackers ("crackers") are known for developing and applying advanced mechanisms to obtain personal information for their own gain. Recently, the Internet has also been introduced to so-called "Spyware" - small programs that scan computers for information, which then is sent to "motherhip" servers for analysis. This is a form of extensive data mining, typically used to build statistical user profiles for commercial purposes. In general, one may presume that, as long as there is a way and will to trace other's digital footprints, one cannot be certain to be anonymous. In the case of debate forums on the Web, however, it is highly unlikely that personal information will become available to other users (if not openly disclosed, that is).



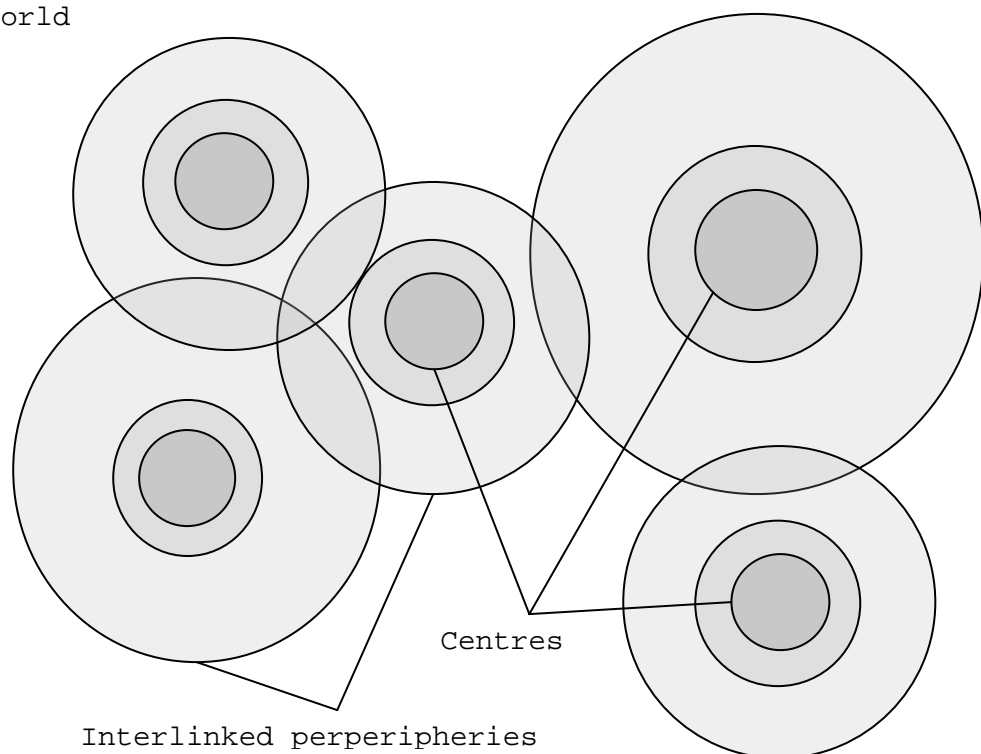
3. With the asynchronous nature of virtual communication modes (that is, besides synchronous modes of "chatting", videoconferencing etc.), it has become a lot easier to choose our own, appropriate times to "log on" to discursive arenas. You may read other's contribution at one moment, submit an own postings later, and read replies at yet another suitable time. This is, perhaps, particularly relevant to those of us with little predictable time to allocate for such relatively "trivial" pursuits. The asynchronous mode also fits particularly well to globally distributed discourse, which, naturally, spans over several time zones.

Although asynchronous communication is nothing new to us (we have had books, magazines and letters for quite a while), the Internet adds a new flavour of "global intimacy and intensity", which we otherwise might have associated with real life notions of "debate", "discussion" or "dialogue" (the communicative iterations may, at will, be so "small" and intensive that they approximate synchronous communication). In short, we may say that the new Internet-supported ICTs\* carry the necessary attributes that make it *practically feasible* and *motivating* enough for time-pressured and geographically dispersed people to engage in communicative interaction with one another.

4. As the globally evolving Internet provides ever new access points to virtual discourse forums, it also promotes new civic relations and associations within which communicative power may flow and accumulate. Thus, traditionally (more rather than less) national-embedded peripheries get entangled into greater, international peripheries, with stronger combined powers (as we, for

example, have seen manifested in recent internationally coordinated demonstrations and Web-petitions against the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq). The Internet, consequently, changes the topology of the "centre-periphery" model, by stimulating conventional peripheries to interlink into "super-periphery" structures, which enclose and "besiege" several centres at once (see Figure 2):

Lifeworld



**Figure 2:** Schematic drawing of a theoretical "super-periphery" structure: In addition to the features explained in Figure 1, the interlinked peripheries now "besiege" several centres at once. Note that communicative channels may (by means of the Internet) be linked between any imaginable points within the (thus dynamic) structure. A point outside the super-periphery instantaneously becomes included in it, when communicative links are established in between.

This list is probably far from exhaustive, but, nevertheless, stresses the most essential contributions of the Internet to peripheral expansion and vitality. In many regards, the Internet seems to approximate and facilitate Habermas' institutional criteria better than the bourgeois public sphere. But, one may ask, are the virtual spaces of the Internet really as free as they seem? Are they not, perhaps, exposed to systemic pressures?

### **2.7.2 Systemic colonisation of the Internet?**

As already stated, Habermas writes (1996: 307 f.):

On account of its anarchic structure, the general public sphere is ... vulnerable to the repressive and exclusionary effects of ... systematically distorted communication...

One may, therefore, believe that the Internet, with its characteristic anarchic structure, would be particularly exposed to systemic distortion. There is, however, little evidence available to support this suggestion. Yes, the Internet has, in many ways, been commercialised - but, I would argue, not significantly so at the expense of communicative arenas. Rather, it seems as if commercial spaces evolve side by side with the communicative ones (this goes particularly for the Web). There is one obvious exception, though: The e-mail infrastructure of the Internet is, momentarily, under strong pressure by commercial interests. As of today, billions of so-called "spam-" or "junk-mails" continuously bombard e-mail-servers, with sales-offers and advertising on everything from potency drugs to accounting software. Whether this systemic invasion may be reversed still remains to be seen. All over the world, the public is asking for new legislation to prevent spamming. The battle has just begun...

Also local, regional and national authorities, along with their public sectors, are going online. As with the commercial presence, governmental and public presence does not seem to meddle with already existing communicative arenas, or to prevent new ones from evolving. On the contrary, so-called e-governance and e-democracy initiatives are taking root all over the world, offering public online services, stimulating civic deliberation, and creating new sluices between peripheries and centres. But, one may ask, is this e-hype much more than just talk? Research strongly suggests yes. Rosén (2001: 4f.) goes as far as calling existing practices of the Internet as "direct channel[s] between politicians and citizens" (in Sweden, that is).

Although it seems hard to find evidence of systemic colonisation of the Internet, it does not mean that such tendencies do not exist. As mentioned in section 2.6.2, Habermas notes (in Calhoun 1992: 437):

The public sphere, simultaneously prestructured and dominated by the mass media, developed into an arena infiltrated by power in which, by means of topic selection and topical contributions, a battle is fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flows that affect behavior while their strategic intentions are kept hidden as much as possible.

It is exactly because the strategic intentions are kept hidden, that it is so hard to uncover them. According to the *New York Times* (Dec. 16<sup>th</sup> 2002), senior Pentagon (US Department of Defence) officials had leaked information on "a secret directive to the American military to conduct covert operations aimed at influencing public opinion and policy makers in friendly and neutral countries. [...] Some are troubled by suggestions that the military might pay journalists to write stories favorable to American policies or

hire outside contractors without obvious ties to the Pentagon to organize rallies in support of American policies." Now, how could we possibly know whether or not such activities actually have been put to life - if not by the Pentagon, maybe by other governmental institutions, or perhaps by other countries? Obviously, one doesn't need to be a conspiracy theorist to believe that there are many secret directives out there, which we never hear about. It is also plausible that public spaces (both virtual and real) are subjected to secret and strategic distortion (by both political and commercial interests). Because of the uncertainty, however, the question on whether all this amounts up to a systemic colonisation becomes a subject of definition and faith.

One should, in this context, distinguish between systemic colonisation and protection (one is offensive, the other defensive). If we consider China's attempts to filter "unsuitable material" from the Internet, most of us would agree that this resembles a self-protective measure by the system against the growing civic potentials of the Internet. Nevertheless, both types represent limitations to "peripheral capacities". Thus, the Chinese government tries to prevent communicative power to build up and unleash (as the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising suggests, the government may find it wise to install "upstream measures"). Even though limited, the Internet is proving to be an empowering tool also to the Chinese periphery: Analysts believe that Internet petitions have influenced policy implementation in favour of the public's online-articulated will (*The Economist*, Jan 29<sup>th</sup> 2004).

Now, given these fairly optimistic tendencies of the Internet, what more is there to prevent conventional peripheries from interlinking into one, virtual mega-periphery?



### 2.7.3 The Digital Divide

There are several conditions that regulate the extent of online deliberation. The most apparent of these are:

1. Material access: You need access to a computer with connection to the *free* Internet (that is, with as little restriction on access and use as "liberally plausible"). The access may be established at, for example, your / someone's home, school, work, or library (or, for that matter, anywhere you might use a computer with a satellite-, telephone- or radio connection).
2. Language: To engage in communicative interaction, you need to have at least one language in common with your interlocutors. Otherwise, you might use translation tools (which, as of today, not yet have reached satisfactory levels of applicability). In the present day, it is common that Internet forums support and allow only one (or a very limited array of) language(s).
3. Knowledge: You need some basic knowledge (or help by someone who has it) to use relevant communication software (web client, IRC client, e-mail client, news client etc). This knowledge is by many - but far from all - perceived as "intuitive" or "trivial".
4. Attitude: In some cases, the attitude towards the intermediary technology, or the general concept of communicating "virtually", may delimit the use of available Internet access. Most often, perhaps, such attitudes may be traced back to "fear of technology" (that is, the perception of not being capable to understand or adapt to the technology at hand).

It is particularly point one, on material access, that is generally associated with the term "digital divide". This understanding stresses the unequal distribution of "digital infrastructures" between and within countries (that is, material prerequisites to the use and distribution of digital ICTs\*). Obviously, there are, indeed, significant gaps in material access to (as is of most interest to us) the Internet: Developed countries generally have more of their households linked with copper-wire and higher income per capita ("digital buying power") than developing countries do.

Even within developed countries (particularly in socio-economic heterogenic ones), there are noticeable divisions: In the US, for example, men (60%) are significantly more likely to have Internet access than women (56%), whites (60%) more than blacks (45%), young (aged 18-29: 74%) more than old (aged 50-64: 52%), rich (household income US\$ 75,000+: 86%) more than poor (less than US\$ 30,000: 38%), well educated (college+: 82%) more than less educated (high school grads: 45%), and urban and suburban dwellers (58% and 63% respectively) more than rural residents (49%) (Source: *Pew Internet & American Life Project Tracking Survey*, March-May 2002).

Income and education are, probably, the most significant underlying factors to an unequal "digital distribution". According to Michael Minges of the Market, Economics and Finance unit at the *International Telecommunication Union* (ITU, a *United Nations* organisation) "limited infrastructure has often been regarded as the main barrier to bridging the Digital Divide", but "[o]ur research [...] suggests that affordability and education are equally important factors" (ITU Press Release, 2003).



Bridging the digital divide qualifies as a long-term political challenge, which, indeed, some countries are taking very seriously: Estonia, for example (which regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and joined the EU 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2004), passed a law (in 2000) declaring Internet access a fundamental human right of its citizens. Backed by massive government funded projects, Estonia has now surpassed EU countries like Spain and France on Internet users per capita (Lungesco 2004 / CIA World Factbook Dec. 2003). The successful roll-out of Internet infrastructure and public access now allows the Estonian government to try out new forms of e-government. "Draft legislation is put up on the [I]nternet, and anyone who may be affected by the changes is invited to comment. The idea is to take democracy a step beyond allowing citizens to express themselves only at the time of elections, and get those affected by law changes involved in the process of drafting them" (*The Guardian*, Apr. 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004).

Estonia already had a relatively well educated population and, with its well aimed policies, backed by public funding, managed to bridge the obstacles presented by infrastructure and relatively low "digital affordability". This should be seen in relation to Nancy Fraser's argument on material support for participation): Based on the conclusion that "participatory parity is essential to a democratic public sphere and that rough socioeconomic equality is a precondition of participatory parity", she states that "some form of politically regulated economic reorganization and redistribution is needed to achieve that end" (in Calhoun 1992: 133 ff.).

New evidence (Fink and Kenny 2003) suggests that Internet access in low- and middle income countries is generally gaining in on high income countries. Although the digital divide (here seen as Internet access per capita) is still wide, it is closing relatively rapidly (which, perhaps, given the market saturation in rich countries, is not so surprising). The same rationale, of course, goes for intra-national distribution of Internet access. It is unlikely, however, that natural market dynamics will be able to bridge the entire gap alone, and that, as Fraser suggests, public policy making and funding still have a significant role to play in that regard.

Another issue concerns language: To engage in communicative interaction over the Internet, you not only need Internet access, but also a common tongue with your interlocutor(s). For long, English has been the lingua franca of the Internet. But, as more and more non-English speakers are joining in, the digital language scene is diversifying rapidly. Many (perhaps most) Internet users know some English (as first, second or third language), but far from all are sufficiently comfortable with it to actively use it in a political debate. Thus, Internet peripheries grow into "language clusters", interconnected by bi/multi-lingual members that take part in several clusters at once. That way, the "unforced force of the better argument" may transmit across language barriers. Still, people with minority tongues, and no knowledge of other major languages, may find it difficult to locate discourse forums with active agendas of their interest. For them, the solutions are to start own discussions / forums in their language, or apply translation software (which, as of today, has not yet reached a satisfactory level of practical applicability).

Besides material access and common language, one needs some basic knowledge to navigate the Internet. This may seem trivial to many. To others, it is a considerable threshold to enter the virtual world. The solution is as simple as obvious: education. Computer and Internet use is already a central post on the modern school's syllabus. But, one may reasonably ask, what about those who left school before the rise of the Internet, or those with no "stimulating everyday exposure" to it? Rural dwellers are one example of underrepresented groups on the Internet. Most of today's farmers, for example, started their career before their schools got hooked to the Internet, and have (at least until recently) no work-related need to go online.

As with material access, one may argue similarly on the immaterial (knowledge): To achieve rough participatory equality, some kind of politically regulated involvement is required. There are encouraging examples of just that: In Germany, for example, a rural initiative by "land women" (*Landfrauen*) resulted in a government- and EU-funded project called *IT-LandFrauen*. It started off with some 44 women in 2002, that were part-time educated and certified to build rural IT-infrastructures (web portals, e-mail services etc), use computers and the Internet, and teach others to go online (*Spiegel Online*, Apr. 5<sup>th</sup> 2004). The project did not only spawn an online marketplace for rural products and services, the *LandPortal*, but also resulted in discursive arenas and ever growing numbers of rural Internet users. Together, the initial 44 certified *IT-Landfrauen* cover all rural regions of Germany; they organise workshops and seminars on how to use computers, go online, build Web pages, and use the Internet to communicate. Whether this particular example is worth following remains to be seen (the project is, after all, still young). The concept by itself, in any case, seems encouraging.

Finally, attitude may play a certain role to the degree of Internet use. Most of us probably know at least someone who is critical to new technologies. Older people and women, many have observed (e.g. Ministry of Research and Information Technology, 1999), are generally more likely to take a sceptical stance toward new technologies. My qualified guess is that such scepticism is rooted in "fear of technology" (that is, in the perception of not being capable to understand or adapt to the technology at hand), rather than in an idealistic stance. Thus, attitudes may be closely related to the previous point - knowledge - and likewise be tackled by education. Also, as time goes by, and technology and society naturally adjust to each other, it is likely that attitudes will adapt proportionally to general demystification and familiarity (as it is with new technologies).

Indeed, the Internet (or the multitude of its discursive forums) may address some of the critique towards Habermas' original institutional criteria. With an unequally available Internet, however, we face a new meta-problem of exclusion. Therefore, the most evident parameters of the so-called digital divide - material access, language, knowledge and attitude - need to be actively confronted if such exclusion is to be significantly reduced. To bridge the span, apparent measures are - as Minges of the ITU indicates (ITU Press Release, 2003) - to motivate the digital infrastructure to grow where it lacks, to provide education where there is too little, and to "trim down" the cost/income ratio (that is, stimulate "digital affordability"). Countries like Estonia, and initiatives like the *IT-Landfrauen*, serve as good examples on how pro-active attitudes within civic and political bodies may help in this regard.

#### 2.7.4 Evaluative implications of the ISS and ANT to the thesis' research questions

Before we go on to the empirics, it is time to revisit the initial problem definition (three research questions), and review its implications in the light of our theoretical repertoire - particularly the Ideal Speech Situation (ISS), Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the revised centre-periphery model.

The first of the three research question asks the following: "To what extent do structures of the given Web forums facilitate free discourse, measured against Habermas' strict criteria of the Ideal Speech Situation\*?" With these "structures", I mean any socio-technical ensembles and features that constitute the given Web forums (e.g. functionality, conceptual frameworks, the human-computer interface, rules of use etc.). To measure the degree of compliancy with the ISS, it is as important to study the subjective perception of the technical ensembles, as it is to study them objectively. In ANT terminology, we may ask: "How are the Web forums' inscribed programs of action perceived by their users, and how do they actually affect the users' behaviour?" The intentions that the creators and regulators may have had as they delegated (*translated*) given competencies to the technical system are, in that context, only interesting insofar as they relate to the ISS (e.g., to what extent these intentions promote communicative participation free from coercion). Even so, it is the actual *strength* of (perhaps even unintended) programs of use that is of most significance to the end-users. Such strength is hardly measurable in numbers, and, thus, has to be assessed in qualitative terms.

The second research question relates to participation and access, and is formulated as such: "...to what extent does the Web - and the given forums in particular - support free access and participation for all classes of society?" To answer this question, we must revisit the issues that relate to the digital divide, and assess their implications to the strict standards of the ISS - specifically, the ISS' first principle, which states that "[e]very subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in the discourse". Again, ANT terminology may be relevant: Besides the already well-documented socio-political and economical factors that regulate participation and access to the Web from *outside* it (i.e. the digital divide), structures of the Web itself - and given Web forums in particular - may influence the de facto level of participation and access. For one, technical complexity may delimit access if it is perceived as a threshold too high to overcome. Similarly, the use of "difficult language" (as sub-cultural or academic jargon) might restrict otherwise competent Web users from entering the discourse.

The last of the three research questions asks: "Are given Web forums connected to other public arenas, so that the impact of communicative action\* from here may propagate towards the decision making cores of societies? Thus, may the unforced force of the better argument persist from Web forum to parliament?" This, obviously, corresponds with the Habermasian centre-periphery model, where, theoretically, the "unforced force" of the better arguments pushes communicative power towards, and into, strong publics with decision-making competencies. In this context, it is of interest to see how the three studied Web forums are connected to other discursive arenas (users that participate in several forums at once, references to external articles and postings, and users that

may sluice the "better argument" into exclusive debates of political parties).

The following chapter (3: Methods) explains how I empirically pursue the search for relevant answers. The chapter thereafter (4: Analysis) provides the critical assessment of my findings.





### **3. METHODS**

#### **3.1 Underlying epistemology**

The theories and strategies of inquiry applied in this thesis build on clear ideas and assumptions on how to choose, collect and interpret data. One of the common denominators of these postulations is the underlying epistemological paradigm by which they are accepted: Critical (Social) Theory (CST).

CST draws its roots back to the Frankfurt School from around 1930. Although this paradigm has undergone change since its early days, most of its essential features have stayed the same: In contrast to positivist thinking, CST rejects the idea of neutral (pure descriptive) social sciences. The classical use of hypothetical deductive methods could not successfully be applied to social phenomena, so the CST, because they indirectly become advocates for the preservation of status quo, and thereby support the upholding of existing social structures. CST "was intended to be a fundamentally different approach which would take into account the human construction of social forms of life and the possibility of their recreation" (Ngwenyama 2002:116). Horkheimer, from whom Habermas later overtook a professoriate at the Institute for Social Research, University of Frankfurt, outlined the goals of CST as such (Frisby 1972:107, in Ngwenyama 2002:116, my emphasis):

The critical theory of society on the contrary (... to the positivist approach) has as its objects men as the producers of their total historical forms of life. The conditions of reality from which science starts out, appear to it not as given to be established and calculated purely on the basis of laws of probability. *What is in each case given, depends not solely upon nature but also upon what men wish to make of it.* The objects and the manner of perception, the statement of the problem and the interpretation of the answers are created from human activity and the degree of its power.

We see a clear belief in human's free will, although delimited somewhat by the "degree of its power", incentives and insight. Thus, it stresses the importance of taking into account all involved actors' subjective perceptions and motivations.

CST takes the consequence of rejecting the separation of value and inquiry by explicitly stating its normative objective: The improvement of human condition. As Marcuse explains (1968, in Ngwenyama 2002:117): "reason means the capacity to understand the existing social world, to criticize it and to search for and present alternatives to it. Reason is here to be understood in the Hegelian sense, as the critical faculty which reconciles knowledge with change towards the goal of human freedom." Marcuse's explanation also unveils another essential aspect of CST: "Theory and practice ought to be inextricably interconnected, because the task of CST is seen as that of reconciling knowledge with the satisfaction of the human need of self-improvement" (Ngwenyama 2002:117 f.). In other words:

CST is pro-active in its nature, by searching and advocating for better alternatives than status quo. Further, CST demands that it "must to be reflexive, that is, it must concern itself with the validity conditions of knowledge and change which it produces" (loc.cit.). This is to be done with full transparency, by "opening up for public debate and critical reflection" (loc.cit.).



### 3.2 Selection of theories and methods

Theories and methods applied in this study are selected on the basis of underlying epistemological assumptions, as stated above. Physical and organizational structures, social relations, symbolic interactions as well as each actor's interpretation of these are the universe of inquiry for CST research. In support of technical knowledge interest, i.e. research in natural sciences, CST acknowledges empirical methods. In the investigation of social relations and structures, CST "adopts pluralistic inquiry methods that are heavily oriented towards interpreting and mapping the meaning and social construction of the universe of inquiry" (ibid: 119f.).

Besides epistemological considerations, the very nature of my interest domain has set strong premises for my choosing of methods:

1. A considerable part of participants in the debate forums are veiled by anonymity. It would be hard to get in direct contact with these participants, and interviewing them is therefore ruled out. Interviewing only non-anonymous participants would result in non-representative data.
2. I would not want to influence the forums' debates by my presence, as the debates themselves are subject to my inquiry. Also, the forums' policies strictly regulate participation in the debates. Therefore, I had to avoid the use of the debates as a medium of communication, and only use them for the establishment of contact.

3. As a direct consequence of point 1 and 2, the only apparent way I could acquire comprehensive knowledge on the participants (gender, education etc), their involvement in the debates and subjective interpretations, was by the use of **online questionnaires**.
4. The moderators\* of the debate forums have tight schedules, which are hard to fit into. This suggests use of asynchronic communication. As e-mail is naturally available to all parts, and everyone seems comfortable by using it, it became the natural choice.
5. The only way to get first hand knowledge of the debates could possibly be by **observation** (as participation is ruled out in point 2).

Within the epistemological framework of SCT, and the inherent restrictions given by the interest domain, the selection of theories and methods has been based on the assumed fruitfulness of applying them to the universe of inquiry:

As stated in point 5, first hand knowledge of the debates can only be obtained by observation. The objective is to gain understanding of both the meanings and intentions (semantics and pragmatics) of postings. This suggests a **hermeneutic investigation**, where the understanding of a given discussion is confronted with the rising understanding of its sub-elements (hermeneutics, Gadamer 1976). I chose to focus on political debates, particularly those concerning the Middle East conflict (where much controversy resides, and thus "the unforced force of the better argument" would be especially valuable to find). Further sampling observation was necessary, as the pool of such debates is vast (2,949 discussions and 41,316 postings on this issue at Aftenposten's *Debattcentralen* alone, Dec. 11<sup>th</sup> 2002). See paragraph on sampling for further explanation on my selection of debates.

For the analysis of socio-technical structures and interactions, I find it useful to lend central assumptions and terminology from **Actor-Network Theory** (ANT). This, because ANT relates well with CST, and provides a conceptual framework and vocabulary that becomes valuable in the analysis and description of socio-technical ensembles.





### 3.3 Sample Selection

For the selection of debate forums to use in my study, I compiled a list of comparable Web forums. The criteria for first-round selection were:

1. Language: The debates should be in English, German or Norwegian - languages I speak and understand.
2. Accessibility and usability: The forums should be easy to find and use by people without advanced technical skills. This suggested Web forums that stand in a relation with online newspapers.
3. Comparability: As already mentioned, I chose to the Middle East conflict as my main focus. It ranges both in width (many sub-conflicts) and depth (long time-span and high complexity). Debates connected to online newspapers are likely to mirror current affairs, and to be sparked off by the same real-life events (thus high degree of similarity in topics).

I used a search engine (Google) to find candidates for the list. After some days of research, the list was populated by 17 online newspapers with debate forums attached to them. They were all based in either North-America or Europe. The second round of selection was by self-selection: I waited for the first three positive replies (the maximum number I thought was manageable), and got no more than three all in all: from *Aftenposten*, *Der Spiegel* and *The Guardian* (most ignored my request; others said they did not have the capacity to participate in my research).

Selections of discussions to observe were largely based on everyday practicalities. My two part-time jobs left me in average one weekday for doing sampling. My method of sampling is very close to random selection: I decided to choose the discussions that had received the latest postings at any given sampling time.

Respondents to the online questionnaire were selected through three levels: 1) Self selection to participate in a given forum, 2) slightly selective exposure to the request to participate (see section 3.4.3), and 3) self selection by choice to participate in the survey. Thus, it is unlikely that numbers obtained through the questionnaire are entirely representative for average forum users. It is, on the contrary, possible that users with a particular need to express their opinions (for example to protest against moderator\* sanctions) are somewhat overrepresented. Therefore, I was careful also to include open and optional fields in the questionnaire, to capture a wide range of supplementary qualitative data.

### **3.4 Methods in action**

As stated earlier, I used three main methods in the study of online forums: Observation to unveil the functional structures of the forums, the semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (intensions) of postings; Interviewing with moderators\* of the forums, to learn about their subjective interpretations and knowledge on the forums and debates; Questionnaires to unveil relevant attributes of the debate participants, and their perception of the forum. Now, this is how I actually did it:

#### **3.4.1 Observation**

After the previous mentioned sampling of debates, I used to follow discussions over time, to see how the debate unfolded. I would read all the postings on their own accord first, to understand them as own entities. Then, I would make conceptual maps of the part-takers in the discussion, the normative stance they took on the issue at hand, and the strategies they applied towards other participants. The central questions I wanted to understand were: What do the different actors intend to achieve with their speech acts, and what strategies do they employ to reach their goal? Is there a real will to find a shared understanding on the issues at hand, or are the discussion mere "ensembles of monologues"? I used standard Web browsers (MS Internet Explorer, Opera or Mozilla) for the observation. Often, I printed out postings to study them in situations where I had no Internet access.

I also used observation to study the forums themselves. I looked for rules that govern the debates, how these rules are employed by the moderators\*, and structural aspects of the forums to which the debates and participants had to adjust.

Further, I tried to find out what definitions and words were used on miscellaneous social and technical phenomena (e.g. on different types of rules and rule breaking), so that I could adjust my language correspondingly in interviews and questionnaires.

None of the forum users were informed about me observing their debates (I only signed a letter of informed consent with the moderators\*). Thus, in a sense, my observation may be labelled as "concealed" or "covert". As the forums are considered as part of the public domain, however, I find this ethically unproblematic.

### **3.4.2 Interviewing**

I interviewed moderators\* of the debate forums. These people also acted as primary contact persons with the newspapers' debate forums, and practical conversations on the telephone were thus common (e.g. about signing a "letter of informed consent" or the practical application of questionnaires). As they could "wear hats" of moderators\*, editors as well as contact persons, they also played different roles in the interviews: They were informants that provided me with inside-information on their debate forum, and they were actors that described their own roles in the forums. I developed the interview questions based on issues raised in my observations, previous interviews and, of course, the thesis' problem definition. I finished one round of interviews with the moderators\* of all three forums, before I developed the next set of questions. I was careful to formulate the questions in such a way that they had the same meaning in the three languages (English, German and Norwegian), so that the answers could be comparable in spite of lingual differences. Also, I

was conscious on formulating the questions so that they were not leading, and that they encouraged the respondents to unfold their answers as freely as possible. Although the singular sets of questions were structured (given as text in e-mail), I would claim that the interviews in sum were semi-structured (as new questions were raised on the basis of answers in previous interview-rounds).

There seemed to be no major drawbacks, but mainly advantages of using e-mail as the interviewing medium. The typical context of physical situated interviewing was not of interest to me. I was only interested in the answers themselves, and was glad that the respondents could find time to formulate reflected answers. The respondents also seemed to appreciate the asynchronic mode of communication, as they could write and send their replies whenever they had time for it. The only drawback was that e-mails easily "get lost" when not answered right away. Therefore, I sometimes had to send the set of questions several times, or even call the respondents, to remind them of the "ongoing" interview.

Regrettably, not all forum moderators\* had the capacity to carry out all the three interview rounds (because of "time constrains"). Thus, only the *Debattcentralen* (DC) moderator\* has completed all three rounds, the *Spiegel Online Forum* (SOF) moderator\* the first two, and the *Guardian Unlimited Talk* (GUT) moderator\* only the first one. The interview transcripts can be found in Appendix 3B.



### 3.4.3 Questionnaires

The idea of using online questionnaires was dual: To retrieve statistics on demographic attributes (as gender) and subjective perspectives of the debate participants. I developed the questionnaire over longer time, partly because it is a time consuming technical business, and partly to refine questions by getting some "distance" to them (avoid getting blinded by proximity). As with the interviews, I was careful to formulate questions that were not leading. Also, I used open fields to include any relevant answers to which I hadn't thought of any questions. I was also careful to formulate my questions so that they would represent the same meaning in the three different languages.

It was a considerable work to negotiate the use of questionnaires with the debate forums. I was not able to find an approach of application that could be used in all three forums, as they all have different regulations and opinions on this. *Aftenposten* went farthest in helping me, by providing pop-up hyperlinks in their *Debattcentralen* debate forum, directly to the online questionnaire, along with an invitation to participate (composed by me). *The Guardian* was sceptic to the whole concept of introducing their users to the questionnaire, and suggested that I should construct my own artificial user pool to study (that is, introduce people to the *Guardian Unlimited Talk* (GUT) first, and then to the questionnaire). This, of course, was not an option, as it would provide a sample outside the actual target group. After some further negotiations, I was allowed to introduce the questionnaire through personal postings in the debates (I introduced myself as "MasterStudent" in postings, which also included an absolute URL-link to the questionnaire). *Der Spiegel's* moderator\* wouldn't explicitly allow either

*Aftenposten's* or *The Guardian's* approach, but hinted that the *Spiegel Online Forum* (SOF) was open to any type of postings, as long as they did not violate the forum's own rules of use (I took this as an indirect invitation to apply the "Guardian approach" here too).

The questionnaires may be found here (as in Appendix 3C, see attached CD):

Guardian: <http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Guardian/quest-eng.html>

Spiegel: <http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Spiegel/quest-ger.html>

Aftenposten: <http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Aftenposten/quest-nor.html>

The questionnaires were built with HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and JavaScript. The CGI (Common Gateway Interface) apparatus, which collected the submitted data on a server and stored it in a spreadsheet-friendly format, was programmed in *Python*. It included an IP-check, so that a person could submit the questionnaire only once.

For the full set of collected data, please see Appendix 3C, (the attached CD).



#### **4. ANALYSIS**

This chapter provides the analytical examination of collected empirics, based upon the research questions presented in chapter 1, and the theoretical framework of chapter 2. First, it investigates the degree to which given Web forums facilitate free discourse, measured against Habermas' strict criteria of the Ideal Speech Situation\* (4.1). Second, and as an elaboration of the previous point, it considers the extent of participation and access to the Internet in general, and the given Web forums in particular (4.2). Third, the Habermasian centre-periphery model of public will-formation is revisited and confronted with empirical findings (4.3). Finally, concluding remarks and suggestions on further research are presented (4.4).



#### 4.1 Free discourse and the Ideal Speech Situation

Habermas provides an unambiguous set of rules for discourse. Particularly points 2 and 3 of the ISS refer to participants' freedom in speech situations:

- 2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
- 2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
- 2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.
- 3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in [...] (2).

Now, to what extent do structures of the given Web forums facilitate free discourse, measured against these strict criteria? To answer that question, I investigated the different forum structures, observed ongoing debates, asked users for their subjective opinions (online questionnaires), and talked to the forum's moderators\* (interviews). I first focus on analysing relevant aspects of Netiquette\* and formal rules of use that govern the forums (4.1.1), before I examine the functional structures of the given Web forums (4.1.2).

#### 4.1.1 Rules of use and Netiquette

Each of the three Web forums in question provides clear guidelines for use. Typically, new users are presented with conditions of use when they register to a forum, and need to accept them to join the debate (that is, to write own postings; reading is open to all). The rules for the *Guardian Unlimited Talk* (GUT), the *Spiegel Online Forum* (SOF) and *Debattcentralen* (DC) may be found here, respectively (see Appendix 2 for full text):

GUT: 1: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/talkpolicy/>  
2: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/article/0,5814,528402,00.html>  
SOF: 1: <http://forum.spiegel.de/cgi-bin/WebX?13@@.ee6d458>  
DC: 1: <http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Register.asp>  
2: <http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Velkommen.htm>  
3: <http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Bruksanvisning.htm>

These "rules", "guidelines", "policies" and "conditions of use" (hereafter P&C) all regulate the proceedings of discourse, and to some extent also the content. In ANT-speak, therefore, such P&C may be considered as translations from anticipated and desired types of use, into explicit inscriptions that prescribe corresponding patterns of use. The crucial question thus arises: Are any of these inscribed patterns of use in conflict with the ideals of the ISS?

#### 4.1.1.1 Principal aspects of rules and Netiquette

The full list of conditions is long and extensive, but the GUT Policy pretty well sums up the most common issues to all forums:

1. We discourage obscenity and mindless abuse. Personal attacks on other users have no place in an intelligent discussion.
2. We will not tolerate racism, sexism or homophobia.
3. We will remove any content that may put us in legal jeopardy, such as potentially libellous or defamatory postings.
4. While we encourage a wide range of views, we will consider removing any content that other users might find extremely offensive or threatening.

Intuitively, such basic rules seem sensible and convincing. For judicial reasons, the forum providers have no choice but to censor or remove postings that may put them into legal jeopardy. But do, for example, "extremely offensive" postings necessarily need to be illegal? Clearly not. Rather, so it seems, the makers of these rules seek to establish a certain culture of "intelligent discussion" - from which offensive language is excluded. Although this issue may seem trivial by itself, it raises some underlying and principal questions: Regardless of formal legality, what rules of use should be considered to be in breach with the ISS? May, for example, an imposed culture of "intelligent discussion" prevent users from expressing their attitudes, desires and needs?

It is obvious that any coordinated effort of communicative deliberation must be built on some minimal ground rules. Such might be simple conventions on quoting, to more complex rules on what should be defined as irrelevant. There are, of course, no a priori or universal formulations of such rules. Typically, they build on traditions of politeness, legal

considerations and aspirations of the forum's creators to promote a certain type of debate culture (i.e. "intelligent discussion"). What is understood as polite and intelligent is, however, a matter of subjective interpretation and relative to the background of individuals. Especially in the context of Web forums, where people with diverse backgrounds meet, such predefined and static definitions may lose some of their meaning. Thus, if such externally imposed rules (and their corresponding enforcement) prevent users from exercising their rights, as defined by point 2 of the ISS, then they indeed are in breach with the ISS. According to the implications of the ISS, any rules should, therefore, be subject to explicit deliberation and definition by the users themselves. Based on communicative interaction, users could build consensus on very basic rules at first (such as voting procedures), and thereafter build more advanced rules on top of these. As long as all rules stay in the realm of "unresolved openness" (exposed to critique and alteration), they would be in compliance with the ISS. Thereby, these rules are also more likely to be acknowledged as legitimate and embraced with a sense of ownership by the users. Conventional wisdom further suggests that users are more likely to have knowledge and respect of rules they define by themselves, than ones that are imposed upon them.

A possible drawback may be that an ever-changing set of rules could alienate users from it ("what is a rule today, may cease to be by tomorrow"). Such disadvantages should, however, not be regarded as irresolvable. For example, a possible solution to the above could be to give new rules a minimum lifetime and / or to demand a high share of users to accept critical changes.

All rules come with corresponding sets of sanctions. Depending on which rule that has been broken, and its severity, the "offender" is likely to face a certain penalty. The concepts of rules and sanctions within Web forums, of course, resemble the general ideas of "rule of law". But while we may expect a so-called "fair trial" when accused of breaking a "real world" law, quite different conditions reside in Web forums: For one, the judge is likely to be same as the executioner. Second, there are often no (or only a few) witnesses to rulings and the resulting sanctions. Third, there is no instance of appeal.

Ideally, as the ISS implies, online community members should be able to influence any rulings and sanctions, by deciding the underlying procedures of enforcement in addition to the underlying pool of rules. As it is the case with rules, such procedures would also need to stay in the domain of "unresolved openness" to be compliant with the ISS. Technically, however, this ideal would be difficult (if not impossible) to implement: As procedures of rule-enforcement need to be supported by the forums' functional frameworks, the functionality would need to change every time the procedures change significantly. Most likely, therefore, there would be too many costs involved to make this a feasible endeavour. Theoretically, however, the Web forums could provide an extensive palette of predefined rule enforcement procedures, from which the users would be likely to choose. Technically, this could be a standardised module which easily could be enhanced or replaced - even by the users themselves if in an Open Source setting. Although a palette only can provide a limited array of possible procedures, it is probably the best way to approximate the ideal.

#### 4.1.1.2 The empirics

The following table sums up the results from the questionnaire, on familiarity with local policies and rules (question 15-1, "How well do you know the ... [forum's policies and] conditions of use (P&C)?"):

Table 1	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Don't know anything about them	9%	39%	20%	17 %
Read them, but forgot	15%	12%	10%	15 %
Know them vaguely	45%	26%	27%	37 %
Read, but didn't understand	2%	0%	0%	1 %
Read, remember and understand	28%	23%	44%	31 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	0%	0%	0%	0 %
SUM *	99%	100%	101%	101%

\* The sums may deviate somewhat from 100%, as the tables' percentage points are rounded off.

As the table indicates, most respondents have some knowledge of given policies and conditions of use (P&C). The variations between the forums may have many obvious reasons. For one, the forums differ in the way they proclaim their P&C: While the GUT and DC demand that users read through and accept them at registration, SOF merely makes them available through a hyperlink in the forum. Second, there is variation in the enforcement (and the need for enforcement) of the P&C: The DC politics discussions stand out as generally being more polarised than their counterparts at GUT and SOF (particularly on issues relating to the Middle East), and are thus relatively more exposed to inflammatory language. This, again, asks for more frequent intervention by the local moderator\*, and stimulates a further debate around the rules and their enforcement. Thus, DC is the only of the three forums that has an ongoing and reflexive discourse about the rules that govern it (where also the moderator\* takes part from time to time). Nevertheless, the rules are predefined and static also in the DC forum, and its users disagree with them as much as users do



in the other forums (at least 6% of the respondents find them too strict, and refuse to accept them - see following table):

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Necessary, I accept	81%	74%	84%	87 %
Too strict, but I accept	11%	8%	7%	3 %
Too strict, I don't accept	6%	6%	6%	6 %
Unaccounted (not replied) *	2%	12%	3%	3 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	99%

\* In hindsight, I see that one essential reply-option was missing: "The rules are not strict enough". Some of the "Unaccounted" replies may have belonged into this category. As more respondents seem to have an opinion on the rules than those that remember them (see previous table), it is likely that many have answered not only on the rules, but also on their enforcement.

The table reflects the results from the questionnaire, concerning opinion on local policies and rules (question 15-2, "If you remember these rules of conduct [the P&C], what do you think about them?").

When it comes to the subjective judgments of the P&C, the variation-span among the respondents is visibly wide. The following is a sample of statements that were submitted by respondents on question 15-3 (Open and optional comments on P&C).

Original statement by NOR-092	My translation into English
Retningslinjene er i seg intet problem, men tolkningen av dem, og den vilkårlige utøvelsen av sensur (som gjerne savner grunnlag i retningslinjene), er svært problematisk.	The guidelines are no problem by themselves, but the interpretation of them, and the arbitrary exertion of censorship (which usually lacks basis in the guidelines), is very problematic.

Original statement by NOR-274	My translation into English
Det er viktig med klare kjøregler selv i anonyme debattfora. Det bidrar til å holde nivået på debattene på et høyere nivå enn hva som er tilfelle på tilsvarende debattfora uten retningslinjer.	It is important with clear ground rules even in anonymous debate forums. This promotes higher debate standards than in similar forums without guidelines.

Original statement by GER-035	My translation into English
Wenn man sich fair verhält richtet man sich automatisch nach den Richtlinien, auch wenn man sie nicht kennt.	As long as you behave in a fair manner, you automatically follow the guidelines, even if you don't know them.

Original statement by GER-119	My translation into English
Richtlinien sind egal, das Internet sollte alle Informationen frei verfügbar haben und ALLE Meinungen sollten gehör finden...	Guidelines are of no interest, the Internet should provide all information freely and ALL opinions should be heard...

Original statement by ENG-017
[Policies and conditions of use are] very important, discipline is essential.

Original statement by ENG-020
I wish the moderators would actually accept their own rules. They impose penalties for many more 'offences' than are actually mentioned in the Talk Policy.

Similar replies can be found amongst users from all the three forums. Thus, five distinct categories of attitudes towards P&C crystallise:

- 1) Anarchic / Evolutionary: There should be no externally imposed or formalised rules at all. Users will develop their own informal codes of use through communicative interaction.
- 2) Common Sense: Conventional etiquette or Netiquette\* should suffice.
- 3) Sceptical support of predefined rules: The concept of predefined rules is acceptable, but the rules' formulation or enforcement is problematic.
- 4) Convinced support of predefined rules: Full support of existing rules and their enforcement.
- 5) Don't care: Don't know the rules, and don't care about them.

Obviously, it may be problematic to accommodate all these regulatory attitudes within a single forum. Typically, more experienced Internet users tend to support categories 1) or 2). They have grown comfortable with general Netiquette\*, and prefer more forum-specific codes of use to evolve "naturally" through discourse. These also tend to be the more active users than the average, and are likely to develop pseudonymous social relations with other active users (which are, mostly, of their own kind). Thus, social sanctions (as ignoring or openly criticising others) may make sense amongst themselves. Such sanctions, however, seem incompatible with less active users, which are unlikely to be part of the forum's social sphere.

Further, there is a constant friction between more experienced users and so-called Newbies\*. Members of the latter category, which are new to the game and tend to be ignorant of Netiquette\*, are bound (unwillingly) to violate such unwritten rules sooner or later. The classic result: A swift (and often harsh) reprimand by more experienced users. This, some may say, is socialisation at its best. Others, however, find it tiring when an otherwise interesting debate gets congested by some Newbie's\* banal missteps (it is not uncommon that such situations derail into tedious disputes about "good manners").

The above arguments suggest that all rules and corresponding penalties (predefined or not) should be explicitly laid down as common reference points, easily available to all members of a forum. Thus, the basis for tiresome disputes over unwritten rules should be diminished (all of the three forums actually do explicitly state the most common Netiquette\* rules, while DC and SOF also explicitly refer to them as "Netiquette"). This, as Jenny Preece (2000:102) puts it, "helps avoid confusion and prevents people from claiming that they have

been treated unfairly". Any further debates on rules should, ideally, be held in designated discussions groups, to reduce disruptions in other discussions (Note: this is presupposing a decisive structural feature that allows such discussion groups, and could constitute as a rule of use by itself). But, one may ask, what about users that do not know the local rules, nor care about them (attitude-category 5)?

It does not take much observing to see that all three forums are plagued with postings that display no communicative value whatsoever, but rather disrupt and derail the debate. This especially seems to be the case in heated political debates, where tiny minorities can cause considerable damage. Here are examples of how some respondents judge their own participation (open and optional field belonging to question 10, asking the respondent for elaborative thoughts on own postings):

Original statement by NOR-115	My translation into English
Jag [...] gör propaganda, mer än debatterar.	I create propaganda, more than I debate.

Original statement by NOR-136	My translation into English
Jeg har en pervers glede av aa latterliggjøre andre i deres egne øyne.	I have a perverse delight of ridiculing others in their own eyes.

Apparently, there are some users that do not share much interest in communicative interaction, and rather use the forums for other purposes. When asked whether some postings (*P*) sabotage the discussion, respondents replied as follows (percentage of those who clicked "Yes". Question 9-9, on other's postings):

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Some <i>P</i> sabotage the discussion	72%	45%	40%	55 %

What this question regrettably fails to take into account, though, is a measure of *severity* of sabotage. While 40% of respondents say that some postings sabotage DC Politics debates, 55% say the same about DC Sport discussions. My observations, however, suggest that the severity of sabotage in DC Politics debates generally is far greater than in DC Sports discussions (even if the triggering cause in both tends to be offensive language or tendentious claims, the effect seems far more disruptive in political discussions). This observation is also supported by interviews with the moderators\* (see interviews in Appendix 3B).

As the moderator\* of DC notes (interview #2): There are several archetypes of users, of which some tend to be more disruptive than others. For one, you have so-called missionaries ("misjonærene") who have strong opinions on specific issues, and tend to be very active in related debates. Most of these, as I have noticed, tend to be somewhat narrow-minded and inflexible in their argumentation, and many of their postings seem rather tendentious (often interpreted as pure propaganda by other users). Thus, one may wonder whether such users actually have any interest in communicative involvement, or rather participate out of a need to express themselves (see their "voice in print" or release frustration on certain issues). The moderators\* univocally support the latter suggestion (see interviews).

Another type of users, with even stronger disrupting tendencies, is made up by alleged provocateurs ("provokatørene"). These users do not necessarily have strong opinions, but rather like to "throw firebrands" ("kaste brannfakler") into the debate, just to see what happens next. Their inflammatory postings can cause great havoc in sensitive debates (e.g. such as on the Israel-Palestinian conflict).

Now, given the fact that some types of users severely disrupt ongoing discussions, and show little respect for the rules of use, the need for sanctions becomes apparent. P&C are generally enforced very similarly in the three forums: Typically, postings that offend local P&C are altogether removed by the local moderator\*, and the offending user gets a warning (through auto-generated e-mail), which says that repeated offences may lead to expulsion from the given forum. Moderators\* also have the technical option to censor parts of postings, but this is seldom practiced because of its time-consuming nature. Expulsion is an option that hardly ever "needs to be" used (according to the DC moderator\*, only 29 of about 20,000 registered users had been expelled by October 2002). This only happens if a user ignores several warnings, or severely sabotages the debate. The DC moderator\* gives a good example of the latter: A user, x, had spammed\* all discussions of the DC forum with meaningless gibberish, generated by a Java-script. This was considered as serious sabotage, bordering on malicious hacking. Thus, besides removing all nonsense postings and dispelling x from DC, x's real identity was traced. Consequently, x was called up and given an oral reprimand. How well exclusion works as a disciplinary threat, however, is uncertain, as expelled users easily can re-register under new pseudonyms.

The SOF moderator\* also practises pre-publishing censorship of postings that are sent to the forum. By default, all newly registered users are on a "moderation-list". Postings by these users must be approved by the moderator\* before being published in the forum. Users that behave well may be removed from this list ("Freischaltung"/"Ausschaltung"), but will be added again if they misuse their privilege ("Einschaltung"). Thus, a substantial share of offending postings is never published in the SOF, since they are filtered out early by the

moderator\*. The mechanism of pre-publishing censorship also has another side effect: Users that are on the "moderation-list" may expect a considerable delay before their postings are published in the SOF (the time it takes for the moderator\* to approve the postings), while the privileged users get their postings published much sooner. It is plausible that SOF-users thereby get an "extra incentive" to follow the rules and rulings of the moderator\*. To some users, though, such mechanisms of authority seem somewhat opaque. As respondent GER-051 notes (survey-question 15-3, open and optional comments on P&C):

Original statement by GER-051	My translation into English
[D]as ein- und ausschalten von teilnehmern durch den sysop sollte für andere sichtbar sein. Genauso auch durch den sysop zensierte Beiträge sollten als zensiert erkennbar sein.	The "Einschaltung" and "Ausaltung" of users by the moderator should be visible to others [all users]. Likewise, postings that are censored by the moderator should be recognisable as such.

This statement touches upon an important issue: Concealed enforcement of rules makes it impossible for the online community to relate to the moderator's rulings, and lays the ground for biased or arbitrary enforcement. Not only may the SOF-moderator\* filter away postings pre-publication, but he / she does so without letting the community review these rulings. Certainly, concealed rule enforcement does not need to be biased or arbitrary, but it gives users a reason to believe so - and many do (the following is a sample of replies to the open and optional field on P&C, survey-question 15):

Original statement by ENG-036, (corrected spelling).
The rules of GUT are not uniformly enforced. A certain level of racist discourse is accepted if it is directed at targets disfavoured by the paper's ideology.

Original statement by ENG-056
The interpretation can seem very arbitrary, and the moderators' actions are rarely explained adequately.

Original statement by GER-053	My translation into English
Die Regeln gelten hier nicht für alle! Der SYSOP stellt seine subjektiven Regeln selbst!	The rules do not apply for all here! The moderator sets his own subjective rules!

As the above examples suggest, not only should rules be explicitly available to all users, but so should all rulings that are based upon them. Thus, the community would easier relate to the rules and their enforcement, and ungrounded suspicions are likely to be avoided.

Many P&C and their corresponding methods of enforcements are interconnected with the functional structures of the given Web forums. As we have already observed, procedures of rule enforcement depend on technical mechanisms to support them (e.g.: pre-publication censoring or expulsion of users). Rules with corresponding functionality can be seen as separate inscriptions that have the same usage-regulating aim, and thereby amplify each other. But, far from all inscribed programs of use have anything to do with rules - many are simply given as prearranged sets of functionality. This aspect will be further investigated in the following section.



#### 4.1.2 Functional structures of Web forums

As rules of Web forums prescribe certain programs of use, so do the functional structures. As Preece (2000:141) writes: "Though obvious that the design of software influences how it is used, less apparent is that the impact of certain software design features may be far greater than is recognized. The structure of software can affect how users go about their tasks, and their social attitudes."

Given our focal points 2 and 3 of the ISS, no speaker should be prevented from introducing or questioning "any assertion whatever", or expressing "attitudes, desires and needs". Thus, any structure that delimits such rights is, in fact, in breach with the ISS.

Like any socio-technological ensemble, Web forums are constituted of numerous inscribed structures. Some may have a major influence on how the forums are being used; others may be utterly irrelevant to us. Besides functionalities that support local rules of use (as discussed in the previous section), two particular functional aspects draw our attention: Anonymity and agenda-regulating structures.

It is interesting how very different the three forums approach the aspect of anonymity. While the SOF discourages (but allows) anonymous participation, the DC explicitly encourages it, and the GUT does not seem to take any clear stance at all (as understood from explicitly stated rules of use and functionality of the forums). Although the three forums attitudes may differ, they all support anonymity to some extent<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> As mentioned earlier, server logs are available to the forum providers, as to law-enforcement agencies with special rights (e.g. search warrant).

If we look at the results from the questionnaire, we see that a majority of respondents participate anonymously (see table below: answers to online survey question 11 on anonymity). The exception is DC Sports, where a considerable (although smaller) share claims that "anonymity is important for free participation in the debate". When asked whether "non-anonymous postings generally display higher quality than anonymous postings", roughly a third of the respondents from GUT and DC agreed, while more than four fifths of those from SOF did the same.

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Participate anonymously	85%	61%	85%	68 %
Anonymity important	74%	56%	71%	49 %
Non-an. postings display higher quality	28%	83%	35%	36 %

Provided that these numbers are somewhat representative, they speak for themselves: Anonymity is, indeed, important for free participation in the debate. If not because of external coercion, it may be out of subjective fear of such. The reasons could be many: Users may be afraid of being prejudged based on ethnic background, religion or gender (which their name could reveal), or being exposed to harassment (the latter is the stated reason to why the DC forum encourages anonymous participation - see interviews in Appendix 3B). The respondents themselves state several reasons (open and optional survey entry, asking the respondents for "elaborative thoughts on anonymity - question 11):

Original statement by GER-021	My translation into English
Vorsicht: zuviele maniacs	Caution: Too many maniacs.

Original statement by GER-051	My translation into English
Anonymität gewährleistet sicherheit vor unerwünschten spam oder virenattacken	Anonymity provides security against unwanted spam or virus attacks.

Original statement by NOR-032	My translation into English
<p>Debattcentralen vet hvem jeg er, men ikke leserne. [...]. Du kan bli utsatt for hets (privat) hvis identiteten er kjent - særlig i debatter som disse (om Midtøsten).</p>	<p>DC knows who I am, but not the readers [other users]. You could be exposed to harassment (private) if your identity was known – especially in debates like these (on the Middle East).</p>

Original statement by NOR-101 (English is allowed in DC)
<p>I firmly believe that our background - nationality, race, religion and age, affect how others respond to us.</p>

Original statement by ENG-043, (corrected spelling).
<p>Because of my type of employment (government), I need to post anonymously.</p>

Original statement by ENG-048
<p>Some US posters tend to attack others on the basis of their nationality (German, French, Swiss, etc.).</p>

And the list goes on (see Appendix 3C to for all statements). Both the quantitative and qualitative data, thus, strongly suggest that anonymity (or as close as you can get to it) should be supported by the Web forums. It is likely that several of the respondents would have quit the forums, or radically changed their behavior, if anonymity no longer was supported (e.g. respondent ENG-043). Thus, not supporting anonymity not only reduces the freedom of discourse, but could also represent a barrier of exclusion to potential users (see section 4.2 for more details on this issue). Both the DC and GUT forums do already adequately support anonymity. The SOF, however, seems not to. Its "Forum-Richtlinien" state the following:

From SOF Forums-Richtlinien	My translation into English
<p>Ihr angegebene E-Mail-Adresse ist für andere Teilnehmer sichtbar, so dass Sie auch auf diesem Wege miteinander kommunizieren können. [...]</p> <p>Die Forumssoftware akzeptiert einige "freie" Mailadressen nicht automatisch, da sich unter diesen häufig Störenfriede mit stets neuen Namen registrierten. Bei Fragen hierzu wenden Sie sich bitte an den Sysop/Moderator.</p>	<p>Your provided email address [which is needed to register] is visible to other users, so that you in that way may communicate directly with others. [...]</p> <p>The forum-software does not accept several "free" email addresses by default, as such often are used by "hecklers" to register under new names. If you have any questions on this issue, please contact the moderator.</p>

Thus, users that want to register with anonymous / "free" email addresses (such as Yahoo! or Hotmail) need to pass an extra threshold of getting permission by the moderator\*. And when registered, the email address will be openly available to all users. Obviously, some users prefer not to be anonymous, and they should have the *option* to openly share their e-mail-address. But, it seems wrong - and in breach with the ISS - that all users should need to do so.

A common argument for and against anonymity is, as respondent ENG-039 notes, that it brings out the best and worst of some people. As people dare to engage more freely in discussions while being anonymous, they also tend to get more outspoken in both positive and negative terms. As Preece (2000:190) notes:

[T]hose who do feel estranged online may feel freer to respond with even more polarized actions. Lack of physical cues online, anonymity, and the ability to disappear without trace clearly have both pluses and minuses for online communities.

Of these reasons, so-called flaming\*, libelous posting, spamming and inappropriate language has a tendency to increase as social cues get fewer and users can hide behind a veil of anonymity. It is thus not surprising that roughly a third of respondents from DC and GUT believe that non-anonymous

postings generally display higher quality than anonymous postings, while the corresponding share of SOF respondents is a staggering 83% (see table 4). One possible explanation to the relative gap between the forums may be that anonymous postings stand out more clearly in the SOF, as they are relatively fewer there. Another (and perhaps supplementary) potential reason is that the pool of users within the SOF has undergone filtration through self-selection, which is sensitive to anonymity-issues. Thus, people that prefer a non-anonymous setting (perhaps out of a belief that it promotes higher quality) may be attracted to the SOF, while some who prefer anonymity may choose not to join. Another option is that anonymous postings in the SOF simply display lower quality than anonymous postings in the other forums (this is not supported by my observations), or that the understanding of "higher quality" differs from the understanding amongst respondents from the other forums. Whatever reason, it is clear that even a majority (56%) of the SOF-respondents find anonymity important, and that the SOF could benefit from changing its functional structures to become more "anonymity-friendly".

As discussed in chapter 2, it is problematic to define anything as of "common concern", or as of "particular interest to the public". In fact, the ISS is very clear on this point: *Everyone* is [to be] allowed to introduce *any assertion whatever* into the discourse (point 2b of the ISS, my emphasis). This does not mean that anyone should be allowed to disrupt any discussions with irrelevant postings. Rather, it says that the overall agenda of the discourse should be open to any subject, and that anyone should be allowed to introduce new issues.

When studying the agenda-regulating structures of the given forums, it soon becomes apparent that all forums - to a varying extent - are in conflict with point 2b of the ISS. Of the three forums the SOF leaves the least options for users to define their own agenda. Here are not only the overall topical categories (such as "Politik" and "Sport") predefined by the forum moderator\*, but so are all discussions that are classified hereunder. As the SOF moderator\* states in interview #1 (see Appendix 3B):

From interview #1 with SOF mod.	My translation into English
<p>Meine Aufgabe ist es, die Diskussionen im Forum zu starten - also Themen auszudenken/vorzugeben, meist natürlich im Zusammenhang mit Artikeln, Kommentaren oder Reportagen. Ich schreibe die Teaser [and] stelle die Eingangsfragen [...].</p>	<p>My job consists of starting discussions in the forums – that is, to come up with / present new issues, most naturally in relation to articles, comments or reportages. I write the "teasers" [and] ask the introductory questions [...].</p>

When seen in relation to implicit Netiquette\* and the explicit rules of the SOF, which both prescribe users to "keep to the issue at hand", it becomes hard, if not impossible, to start discussions on issues that not yet have been predefined by the moderator\*.

Although both the GUT and DC allow users to start own discussions, none of them have any functionality that would allow users themselves to introduce new topical categories. Thus, even if users of these forums may initiate a new discussion thread, they have to stick to the topics that have been predetermined by their moderators\*.

A positive side effect, however, is the result of the ongoing and reflexive meta-discourse within the DC (that is, a predefined category called "om Debattcentralen" - "about DC", where users discuss rules and functionality of the forum): Thus, users have been given an arena which they can use to discuss anything that relates to the DC Web forum. Here, the moderator\* gets openly criticised, rules are discussed, suggestions for new functionalities are made, and sometimes the moderator\* is asked to initiate a new topical category. At least one example shows that the latter may work: On the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2004, the user "Magyar" openly asked the moderator\* to invoke a new category on "EM 2004" (Euro 2004 - the European football championship). Indeed, a few days later the moderator\* did exactly that. Although this is an exception (the moderator\* has so far ignored several other requests, and the "EM 2004"-category might have been invoked anyway), it shows how communicative power may manifest itself, when given an opportunity.

The only plausible solution to the general lack of user's rights to define their own agenda, is to implement functionality in the forums that would allow them to invoke own topical categories and (in the case of SOF) also start their own discussions. A possible drawback is that large numbers of categories make it harder to keep an overview within the forum, and that some of them might get overlapping. Also, some categories may not be interesting enough to attract

a critical mass of users. But, surely, there are possible counter-measures: For example, any proposal for a new category could be subject to a discussion, with a final vote on whether or not to actually invoke it.

When asked directly about the relevant points of the ISS (question 12 of online survey), users replied as such:

Table 5

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Positive reply ("yes") to question 12-1 *	87%	70%	85%	97 %
Positive reply ("yes") to question 12-2 **	23%	19%	17%	4 %

\* "In this debate forum, do you feel free to question any assertion whatsoever, introduce any new assertion, and express your attitudes, desires and needs?"

\*\* "Do you sense any internal or external coercion that prevents you from free participation in this forum?"<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, there is a clear disparity in replies from DC Politics and DC Sports. They are both part of the same forum, with the same rules and structures, and differ only in topic of discussion. Thus, it seems as if the nature of political discussion itself provokes a sense of coercion. By studying the open and optional replies on the follow-up question ("please elaborate..."), respondents primarily state politically motivated censorship and control by the moderator\* as reasons to why they sense that they cannot participate freely. Also, a culture of political correctness, intimidation by other users, and the lack of functionality to start and define own discussions (the latter especially amongst SOF-respondents) are given as common reasons.

The next section takes up the remaining part of the ISS, concerning access and participation, which is closely related and intertwined with the just discussed issues of participatory freedom.

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<sup>11</sup> The latter question, 12-2, may by some respondents (according to the open follow-up question) have seemed somewhat vague or difficult to understand. Thus, replies to 12-1, which concerns the same issue, seems more accurate.



## 4.2 Participation and access

Like the ISS provides an unambiguous set of ideals for participatory freedom, so it does on participation and access. Particularly points 1 and 3 of the ISS take up participatory rights in speech situations:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
  
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) [...].

Thus, we have a strict scale to measure the Web - and the given forums in particular - up against. First, I take up again the notion of the digital divide (4.2.1), as already introduced in section 2.7.3. Thereafter, I reinvestigate the forums' rules of use and functional structures in the light of the above stated ideals of the ISS (4.2.2).

#### 4.2.1 The Digital Divide and exclusion

As already described and discussed in section 2.7.3<sup>12</sup>, there are several conditions that regulate the extent of online deliberation - of which the most apparent are material access, language, knowledge and attitude. Such parameters of the so-called digital divide are, because of their unequal distribution, amounting to a meta-problem of exclusion: Since some people cannot afford to acquire material access to the Internet, they are far less likely to participate in a Web forum than those with the necessary means. Similarly, those that do not speak the permitted language(s) of a given forum have little chance to make themselves understood. Even if you have access and master the "right" language, you might lack the little but significant knowledge to surf the Web - that is, if you are not prevented by a sceptical attitude towards, say, the underlying technologies of the Internet. Thus, as concluded in section 2.7.3, these parameters of the digital divide need to be actively confronted if such exclusion is to be significantly reduced: Apparent measures are - as Minges of the ITU indicates (ITU Press Release, 2003) - to motivate the digital infrastructure to grow where it lacks, to provide education where there is too little, and to "trim down" the cost/income ratio (that is, stimulate "digital affordability"). Countries like Estonia, and initiatives like the *IT-Landfrauen*, serve as good examples on how pro-active attitudes within civic and political bodies may help in this regard.

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<sup>12</sup> The reader is encouraged to revisit section 2.7.3 for further elaboration.

#### 4.2.2 Rules of use and structural functionality

The most apparent excluding factor is already introduced through section 4.1.2: anonymity - or, rather, the lack of it. The SOF is the only among the three forums that does not have an "anonymity friendly" structural framework: One is encouraged to use one's personal e-mail-address (that is, not a "free" one from, for example, Yahoo! or Hotmail), which the SOF then makes available to all when one submits postings. As already mentioned, this may lead to self-selection, where some potential users may choose to abstain from joining the SOF (for, although it is possible to be anonymous in the SOF, it may be perceived as a considerable effort to become so). Thus, it is plausible that some groups with self-perceived needs for anonymity may feel circuitously excluded. As Preece notes on, for example, gender (2000:154 ff.):

Revealing one's gender online can have startling consequences. For example, it is well known that in some online environments, responses to men are different from those to women (Bruckman, 1993; Herring, 1992; Turkle, 1995, 1999). [...] A person identified as female may receive from men excessive, unwanted, attention and be bombarded by questions and sometimes propositions or harassment. Consequently, women frequently disguise their gender so that they can maintain their freedom in the electronic world.

Thus, it is conceivable that certain groups, like women, may get indirectly disfavoured by the SOF. If this is the case, we could expect a lower relative share of the SOF-users to be women. Second, we could expect these women to find anonymity less important than women in the other forums (as we expect a significant amount of those who find it important to abstain from joining or actively using the "anonymity-unfriendly" SOF). Now, let us see whether the numbers support such a suggestion:

The following table shows the number of respondents in both absolute and relative terms, seen in relation to gender:

Table 6

	GUT Politics		SOF Politics		DC Politics		DC Sports	
	absolute	relative	absolute	relative	absolute	relative	absolute	relative
Male	42	79 %	107	86 %	100	81 %	108	92 %
Female	11	21 %	17	14 %	24	19 %	9	8 %
SUM	53	100 %	124	100 %	124	100 %	117	100 %

Although the female share of users is generally low, the share in the SOF is particularly low - only 14% (the female share in DC Sports is by far the lowest, but this is not considered relevant, as the different debate topics make them incomparable - that is, Sports vs. Politics). Provided that the given numbers are fairly representative, and that the forums are somewhat comparable by topical categories, they might suggest that about a fourth of women (as potential users) have chosen not to become active users in the SOF, because of its "anonymity-unfriendly" attitude (constituted by functionality and rules). The number of other influencing factors is, however, large. It is thus hard to tell whether these numbers might be influenced by very different (perhaps supplementary) aspects - such as, say, a relatively more "difficult language" in the SOF (the latter is merely a suggestion, not an observation). If we dig just a bit deeper, though, we find some other numbers that might shed light on a potential causal link between gender, anonymity and exclusion. The following table shows the respondents positive answers ("yes") to whether they "feel that anonymity is important for free participation in the debate" (survey question 11-2), relative to gender:

Table 7

	GUT Politics		SOF Politics		DC Politics		DC Sports	
	absolute	relative	absolute	relative	absolute	relative	absolute	relative
Male	30	71 %	62	58 %	68	68 %	51	47 %
Female	9	82 %	8	47 %	20	83 %	6	67 %
Total	39	74 %	70	56 %	88	71 %	57	49 %

Thus, 47% of all the female respondents from the SOF “feel that anonymity is important for free participation in the debate”, compared to 58% of the male ones. This is the contrary of what Preece implies as typical, and divergent from what results from the other forums show (where female users generally find anonymity more important than male users). This, indeed, further supports the idea that the pool of potentially active SOF-users undergoes a filtration through self-selection that is sensitive to anonymity.

Another and perhaps more evident aspect of exclusion is related to Web accessibility. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), which sets the standards for the codes used to create Web pages, has come up with a clear-cut and authoritative set of guidelines for all-inclusive Web design. Under its “WAI” banner (Web Accessibility Initiative), these guidelines have become known as the WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). The guidelines come with a set of checkpoints against which Web pages should be confronted. Each checkpoint has a priority level assigned to it, based on its impact on accessibility<sup>13</sup>:

**[Priority 1]**

A Web content developer **must** satisfy this checkpoint. Otherwise, one or more groups will find it impossible to access information in the document. Satisfying this checkpoint is a basic requirement for some groups to be able to use Web documents.

**[Priority 2]**

A Web content developer **should** satisfy this checkpoint. Otherwise, one or more groups will find it difficult to access information in the document. Satisfying this checkpoint will remove significant barriers to accessing Web documents.

**[Priority 3]**

A Web content developer **may** address this checkpoint. Otherwise, one or more groups will find it somewhat difficult to access information in the document. Satisfying this checkpoint will improve access to Web documents.

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/#priorities>

These priorities, in turn, are correlated to a scheme of conformance. As the same WAI page<sup>14</sup> further notes:

- **Conformance Level "A"**: all Priority 1 checkpoints are satisfied;
- **Conformance Level "Double-A"**: all Priority 1 and 2 checkpoints are satisfied;
- **Conformance Level "Triple-A"**: all Priority 1, 2, and 3 checkpoints are satisfied;

Ideally, thus, the Web forums should comply to Conformance Level "Triple-A". This would demand from the forums' design of Web pages to pass basic checkpoints as, say, "2.2"<sup>15</sup>:

- 2.2** Ensure that foreground and background color combinations provide sufficient contrast when viewed by someone having color deficits or when viewed on a black and white screen. [Priority 2 for images, Priority 3 for text].

When thoroughly checked<sup>16</sup>, we see that the three forums do fairly well - although they fail to pass several checkpoints. The most significant failure by all forums is, perhaps, their excessive reliance on HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) tables for layout purposes, and this with scarce use of identifying headers. Such layout strategies make it hard for blind users to get an intuitive overview of Web pages and to extract meaning from them. Thus, even though the forums are inclusive to most users, they disfavour a handicapped minority. Thereby, the forums do not only fail to comply the ISS' standards for access, but also to an often cited (and highly related) ideal by Sir Tim Berners-Lee, W3C Director and inventor of the Web: "The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect."

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/#Conformance>

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/#gl-color>

<sup>16</sup> With the support of "BOBBY", an automatic accessibility validation tool, see <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10-CORE-TECHS/#ref-BOBBY>

A further exclusionary aspect is related to language. For one, and as already explained as a parameter of the digital divide, different languages may prevent users from communicating in the same Web forums. Secondly, different types of language use (e.g. sub-cultural terminology) may trigger misunderstandings, or even incomprehensible and incompatible lingo (say, a primary school pupil, using contemporary youth slang, communicates with a professor in political science on the Middle East conflict). It might work - but when youth slang and academic jargon are used in the same discussion, it is conceivable that the threshold of interpretation may become just too high for some. In this context, we are witnesses to a language paradox: On one side, allowing only certain languages, or uses of a given language, may prevent users from joining into the discourse. On the other hand, a discourse that has no restrictions on language may end up in Babylonian confusion. Both instances are excluding.

Interestingly, in contrast to the other two forums, DC explicitly allows several languages<sup>17</sup>: "Scandinavian" (Danish, Norwegian or Swedish) and English. May that, perhaps, represent a problem of exclusion? If we look at what languages the different forum users find comfortable to use in a debate, we get the following picture (table 8 reflects results from questionnaire questions 3 and 4 - Primary language and other languages that respondents find comfortable to use in debate):


Table 8

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
English	100%	87%	72%	66 %
French	21%	23%	6%	1 %
German	21%	100%	14%	3 %
Italian	2%	7%	1%	0 %
Scandinavian	9%	1%	94%	100 %
Spanish	11%	15%	7%	0 %
Other(s)	13%	22%	12%	2 %

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<sup>17</sup> My observations show that also the SOF allows English - tacitly, that is.

As we see, DC is the only forum in which not all users feel comfortable to use the forum's native language - in this case Norwegian (Scandinavian). Neither do all of the DC users feel comfortable to use English in debate. Thus, one might expect that users would group in "language cliques" (i.e. that users primarily take part in discussions that are in their favoured language). My observations, however, do not support such an assumption. Rather, so it seems, discussions manage to combine several languages rather well. For, although not all DC users feel comfortable to use a Scandinavian language in debate (i.e. to write postings), they appear to understand it. The following posting by "josbrone01" is a good example<sup>18</sup>:

 <b>josbrone01</b> [499] 08.10.02 09:01
>>Det er jo litt morsomt at USA vil ha Saddam opp for en type rettsinstans de selv ikke vil tillate brukt overfor sine egne statsborgere.>>
The USA has never asked that Saddam ever face a trial in the ICC [International Criminal Court]. This is all conjecture. [...]
>>ikke vil tillate brukt overfor sine egne statsborgere.>>>
The whole point of the ICC is to punish criminals of major crimes who would NOT otherwise be punished in their own countries. The USA has a very effective and functional judicial system that punishes its own criminals. Iraq does NOT. In Iraq, a crime against humanity [...] goes unpunished. [...]

While "josbrone01" cites another user in the original language, Norwegian, he / she replies in English. The posting then gets well integrated into the ongoing discourse, which for the most part continues in Norwegian. However, one may ask: is it the multi-lingual setting that fits the users, or the users that fit to the multi-lingual setting? Apparently, as mentioned earlier<sup>19</sup>, potential users undergo a filtration through self-selection that is sensitive to issues with importance to each individual. Thus, it is not unlikely that

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<sup>18</sup> I have edited the posting somewhat to shorten it down and remove "bad language", see sections with brackets.

<sup>19</sup> See discussion on anonymity, under section 4.2.2.



some users might abstain from participating in the DC forum, if they of some reason do not like or cope with its multilingual setting. Nevertheless, from a purely utilitarian point of view, it seems the best to uphold this multi-lingual setting - even if it excludes some users, simply because the expected benefits exceed the detriments (measured in numbers of potential users that are expected to be included in either case). This, however, is only probable because English is such a well established secondary language in Norway, and would be less likely to work in, say, a French forum.

Ideally, according to the ISS, there should be no excluding factors whatsoever to a speech situation - not even language. Although this may appear like an utopian ideal, it may seem realistic by tomorrow. Advanced translation software could, theoretically, be applied on both client and server side.

A complete list of excluding aspects would be impossible to compile - there are just too many factors (*actants*) involved. Some derive from outside the Web (i.e. the digital divide), others from within it (technical structures of the Internet, open standards, unwritten conventions for use, etc). Some may be influenced or invoked by those who create and maintain the Web forums (rules of use, their enforcement and functional structures), while still others could be instigated by the forum users themselves (intimidation, difficult language, etc). It is also plausible that users may conceive exclusion that does not really manifest itself in any noticeable way (e.g. internal coercion). Some exclusive factors may be traced back to intended translations into usage-regulating inscriptions, while still others may come about as unintended side-effects, or even by utter coincidence. The issue of exclusion from Web forums could probably by itself be a playground for several doctoral theses...



### 4.3 Public will formation

The last of the three research questions asks whether the given Web forums are connected to other publics, so that the impact of communicative action\* from here may propagate towards the decision making cores of societies. "Thus, may the unforced force of the better argument persist from Web forum to parliament?" This question corresponds with the Habermasian centre-periphery model, where, theoretically, the "unforced force" of the better arguments pushes communicative power from *weak* publics (as Web forums) towards, and into, *strong* publics with decision-making competencies. It is therefore of interest to see whether, how, and to what extent the three relevant Web forums are connected to other discursive arenas. Hence, the subsequent sections are to answer three very relevant questions: For one, to what extent do users participate in several Web forums, so that they can pass the "better argument" from one to the other (4.3.1)? Second, are there users that could be described as "bearers of communicative power" by potentially being able to sluice the better argument into exclusive debates of political parties (4.3.2)? Finally, are hyperlinks commonly used as references to external sources, so that outside arguments easily can get internalised into the ongoing debate, and can stand in their own right (4.3.3)?

### 4.3.1 Cross-forum participation

People that participate in several forums have a capacity to function as "bearers of the better argument". As stipulated in section 2.7.1, peripheral discourse on the Internet may thus form into "super-periphery" structures. In consequence, convincing arguments presented in one forum could easily spread to other forums through "cross-forum participation".

When asked whether they "participate in any other debate forum(s) connected to online newspapers", respondents replied as follows (to survey question 7):

Table 9

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
"Yes"	34%	44%	59%	53 %
"No"	66%	56%	41%	47 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	100%

Given that these numbers are somewhat representative, between 34% (GUT) and 59% (DC Politics) of the forum users participate in several forums. Interestingly, several of such "other forums" originate in other countries, and are in other languages than the ones in this study. For example, some amongst SOF respondents replied (to follow-up question 8) that they participated in forums connected to *The New York Times* (USA), *The Washington Post* (USA), *Le Monde* (France) and *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Poland). Similarly, DC users said that they participated in forums connected to *Jabloko* (Russia), *Göteborgs-posten* (Sweden), *Libération* (France), in addition to unspecified British, German and Danish newspapers. It is thus plausible that "cross-forum participants" pick up arguments by own conviction in, say, *The Washington Post*, and later defend the same arguments in the SOF (and vice versa).

### 4.3.2 Periphery-centre transmission of communicative power

Like users can be "bearers of the unforced force of the better argument" between virtual forums of the Web, so they can between virtual forums and the real world. Thus, users that are politically active can pick up arguments in a Web forum and introduce them to the internal discourse of their political parties. That way, the "better argument" is sluiced from periphery towards the centre - from weak publics to strong publics. If a given user is part of a political-administrative system (e.g. parliament or government), he or she could even "inject" the argument directly into the "decision-making machinery" of the centre.

When we consider the political activity of forum users (see table below, based on replies to survey question 06-2), we observe that a clear majority proclaims to be "Not active". There is, however, a considerable bulk of users that declare themselves to be members of political organisations or parties (i.e., between 15% in the SOF and 27% in DC - in political discussions, that is).

Table 10

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Not active	75%	85%	64%	93 %
Member of pol. organisation / party	25%	15%	27%	5 %
Holding political position, by election	0%	1%	9%	2 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	0%	0%	1%	0 %
SUM	100%	101%	101%	99%

The amount of users holding a political position by election is generally low (0% to 2%), with the exception of DC Politics (9%). This relative gap may, possibly, be traced back to different political cultures in which "holding a political position by election" varies in meaning (e.g., in Norway it is common that even "low" posts within a party are considered as such). Without further speculations, however, we may note that

members of strong publics are well represented. It is thus plausible that some of such users, knowingly or not, act as advocates for peripheral arguments that seem convincing, by introducing and defending them within an otherwise exclusive discourse of political institutions.

A relevant issue is that online newspapers - and their related paper issues - seem to find growing interest in forum debates. According to the DC moderator\* (interview #3), this is based on a deliberate strategy by the management to bond their paper and Web issues tighter to their forum. This manifests itself through forum debates initiated by the paper's editorship, which the paper and / or online issue then summarise or even cite from. The following is an example from Aftenposten's Web issue (header from 4<sup>th</sup> of Nov. 2003):

	<p><b>- Islam må moderniseres</b> Statsråd Erna Solberg forlanger at norske muslimer moderniserer sin islam. Hun er kritisk til imamene, og vil ha en egen ed for dem som blir norske statsborgere.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">Solberg utfordrer norske muslimer</a></li><li>• <a href="#">- Skjønner ikke hva hun mener</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Leser om utspillet: "Navlebeskuende etnosentrisme"</a></li></ul>
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The header cites the Communal Minister stating that "Islam must be modernised". This is followed by an introductory paragraph, two hyperlinks to related articles, and another link to a forum debate<sup>20</sup> on this particular issue.

Although the latter link's name, "...egocentrism" obviously is selected by the paper itself, and only represents a fraction of a forum statement (by "OldCommie"), it nevertheless invites and "teases" readers to follow the link to the whole debate. Thus, the forum gains a role similar to the paper issue's "letter to the editor" or "the debate page" - only far more inclusive and dynamic.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Item.asp?GroupID=44&Group=Innvandring&ThreadID=58356>

### 4.3.3 Hyperlinks to external resources

As the prior example has shown, hyperlinks can serve as ties between otherwise separated Web pages. Thus, they play a central role in including external points of view into the ongoing online discourse, and so further integrate single peripheries into "super-periphery"<sup>21</sup> structures. Also, hyperlinks may serve as "instant references" (only a click away) that provide elaborative information on given issues. The "virtual proximity" to referred Web pages, in a sense, may also turn such pages into (second degree) postings that stand in their own right. It is therefore curious that not all of the three forums fully utilize the potentials of hyperlinks: While the SOF and GUT both allow hyperlinks and make them clickable, the DC does not support the latter. Thereby, the links turn into mere URL addresses that are much farther than just "a click away". According to the DC moderator\*, it would be a small technicality to turn the URLs clickable. However, the moderator\* says that they try to reduce "such linking", and provides several examples of links that they had to remove because of their reference to illegal or unsuitable content (see interview #2, Appendix 3B). Whatever the reason, DC users are missing out on something (as several users also note through open and optional fields of the online survey).

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<sup>21</sup> As stipulated in section 2.7.1

#### 4.4 Concluding remarks and future research

This analysis, based on extensive empirical material, has provided several answers to the initial research questions. Let us start with the first question:

1. Ideal Speech Situation\*: To what extent do structures of given Web forums facilitate free discourse, measured against Habermas' strict criteria of the Ideal Speech Situation\* (ISS)? Seen in context of deliberative\* democracy\*, how may online Web forums further approximate the ISS, to enhance their civic potentials?

The research has shown that all forums, to some extent, fail to facilitate free discourse as stipulated by the ISS. The case of forum regulation with static, pre-defined rules is generally problematic, and should ideally be abolished to the expense of self-regulation within a dynamic functional framework (see 4.1.1.1 for suggestions). Rule enforcement, which today is "opaque business" in all three forums, should become more transparent, and subjected to users inspection and criticism. For this, the users need a reflexive arena where they can discuss issues relevant to the forum (i.e. functional structures, rules and sanctions, etc). Further, the forums should give the users more freedom in setting their own agenda - that is, allowing them influence on topical categories and control to start own discussions. In the case of the SOF, the moderator\* should seriously consider to abolish his / her right to exercise pre-publication censorship.



With regard to the second research question:

2. Participation and access: As an elaboration of the previous point, to what extent does the Web - and the given forums in particular - support free access and participation for all classes of society?

The case of the digital divide has exposed a general problem of "meta-exclusion", along several parameters. If this divide is to be bridged, a range of socio-political counter-measures need to be put in motion - and firmly supported by political will and funding (see section 2.7.3 for justification and examples on initiatives to bridge the gap).

When we focus on the given Web forums in particular, we see that they are exclusive in several ways. For one, they are all in breach with well documented and reasonable guidelines on accessibility. For example, the forums' pages are extensively based on an encoding that is hard for blind people to navigate in.

As we have seen, a majority of users "feel that anonymity is important for free participation in the debate". Functionality and procedures that discourages anonymity (as employed in the SOF) thus seems to circuitously reduce the access to some categories of users. The SOF should therefore consider reviewing its approach on anonymity.

Although language seems to be a natural barrier for all-inclusive access and participation, the rapid development within translation software may soon provide new solutions. Ideally, therefore, the forums should seek to employ such software as soon as it becomes available.

The third and last of the three research questions asked the following:

3. Public will formation: Are given Web forums connected to other public arenas, so that the impact of communicative action\* from here may propagate towards the decision making cores of societies? Thus, may the unforced force of the better argument persist from Web forum to parliament?

As results from the online questionnaire have shown, the three forums are indeed connected to a magnitude of other public arenas. To a large extent, such connections are made by users that take part in several Web forums. Those users that are members of political parties, and / or even in direct affiliation with decision making institutions (i.e. strong publics), have a capacity to function as "bearers of the unforced force of the better argument". Thus, the "better argument" is transmitted towards and into the decision making cores of societies (that is, "sliced" from "weak publics" into "strong publics"). The deliberate strategy (by the DC and Aftenposten management) to bond their paper and Web issues tighter to their forum may seem encouraging in this regard: Thus, the forum discourse gets more exposure and attention to a wider public. A less encouraging feature of the DC forums, however, is that it does not allow clickable hyperlinks to external resources. Thereby, outside arguments meet a higher threshold in becoming internalised in the forum.

Although there already exists a considerable body of literature on Habermasian theory and the Internet, relatively little attention has so far been given to the specific field of the ISS and public will formation in relation to Web forums. I therefore hope that this thesis may have contributed with some useful findings or conceptual angles to this academic niche. I do, however, realise that I only have scraped on the surface of what could, and should, be investigated more. The following areas of inquiry would be particularly useful to pursue further:

- What role does online deliberation play in different types of societies (e.g. China vs. India vs. western democracies)?
- How sure can users of Web forums be that they are anonymous, and that personal information is not leaked?
- How close could one, theoretically, come in realising the ideals of the ISS in Web forums? What would the specifications of such a forum look like?
- To what extent does it, pragmatically, make sense for commercial Web forums to follow the imperatives of the ISS? Which *actants* are involved, and what are their interests and strengths?
- What lessons can be drawn from non-commercial Internet forums, which already have experimented with extensive user autonomy (e.g. Usenet)?

If the empirics collected for this thesis may be to any help for future research, please feel free to use them.



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## **Appendix 1: Vocabulary**

These are clarifications of terms used throughout the thesis, which are marked with an asterisk (\*).

### **CMC**

*Computer-Mediated Communication*. Broadly defined as the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information (text, audio, video etc) using networked telecommunications systems, or computers, that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages. The most widely known and popular uses of CMC include e-mail, chat (IRC and various other forms of *instant messaging\** - e.g. AOL, Yahoo! and MSN Messenger), newsgroups and video-conferencing.

### **Communicative Action (Habermas)**

"reasoned argument among those subject to the norm in question", where the aim is "to reconstruct the moral point of view as the perspective from which competing normative claims can be fairly and impartially adjudicated." (Introduction by Thomas McArthy in Habermas 1995: viii). See also section 2.6.3.

### **Computer-Mediated Communication**

See *CMC*

## **Deliberative Democracy**

From Civic Practices Network's definition,  
<http://www.cpn.org/tools/dictionary/deliberate.html>:

Democracy that "rests on the core notion of citizens and their representatives deliberating about public problems and solutions under conditions that are conducive to reasoned reflection and refined public judgment; a mutual willingness to understand the values, perspectives, and interests of others; and the possibility of reframing their interests and perspectives in light of a joint search for common interests and mutually acceptable solutions."

## **Discourse Ethics (Habermas)**

See section 2.6.4

## **Flaming**

*CMC* behaviour interpreted as inappropriately hostile. It may consist of impoliteness, swearing, charged outbursts, and / or excessive use of superlatives. Does not necessarily contain obscene language, but may. Considered as bad *Netiquette*.

## **ICT / ICTs**

See *Information and Communication Technology/-Technologies*

## **Ideal Speech Situation**

See section 2.6.4

## **IM**

See *Instant Messaging*.

## **Information and Communication Technology / - Technologies**

ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication technology, device or application. It is most often used about *computer-mediated communication\** technologies, but generally refers to any technology that promotes flow of information.

## **Information Systems**

See *IS*.

## **Instant Messaging**

From [www.pcwebopaedia.com](http://www.pcwebopaedia.com): "[A] type of communications service [or software application] that enables you to create a kind of private chat room with another individual in order to communicate in real time over the Internet, analogous to a telephone conversation but using text-based, not voice-based, communication." Classical examples are IRC and various forms of "messaging", e.g. AOL, Yahoo! and MSN Messenger.

## **IS**

*Information Systems*, a sub-discipline of computer science. Defined by Roger Clarke (1995) as such: "[T]he multi-disciplinary study of the collection, processing and storage of data; of the use of information by individuals and groups, especially within an organisational context; and of the impact, implications and management of artefacts and technologies applied to those activities."

## **ISS**

See *Ideal Speech Situation*.

## **Lifeworld (Habermas)**

See section 2.6.2

## **Moderator**

Individual or group with the authority to enforce rules of use in Web forums. Moderated forums generally have fewer flames and less spam than un-moderated forums.



## **Netiquette**

Etiquette guidelines for posting messages to online services, and particularly Internet newsgroups and Web forums. Netiquette covers not only rules to maintain civility in discussions (i.e., avoiding flaming), but also special guidelines unique to the electronic nature of forum messages. For example, Netiquette advises users to use simple formats because complex formatting may not appear correctly for all readers. In most cases, netiquette is enforced by fellow users who will vociferously object if you break a rule of Netiquette.

## **Newbie**

A newbie (pronounced NOO-bee) is any new user of a technology. The term is commonly applied to new users of personal computers and to new users of the Internet. According to Eric Raymond's *The New Hacker's Dictionary*, the term is a variant of the English public school term, *new boy*, someone in the first year or period of school. The term predates the Web and has been used for some time in newsgroups. People that fall into this category are often considered as having little knowledge of the domain they are new to, and tend to be interpreted as ignorant in online discussion forums. Such people are thus likely to violate *Netiquette*\* without even being aware of it.

## **Newsgroup**

Online discussion group. On the Internet, there are newsgroups covering most conceivable interests. To view and post messages to a newsgroup, you need a news client, a software application that connects you to a news server.

## **Public Sphere (Habermas):**

See section 2.6.1

## **Spam**

Unsolicited e-mail. From the sender's point-of-view, it's a form of bulk mail, often to a list culled from subscribers to an e-mail discussion group or obtained by companies that specialise in creating e-mail distribution lists. To the receiver, it usually seems like "junk". The term is also used on unsolicited forum postings. In general, it is considered bad *Netiquette*\* to send spam. It is said that the term is derived from a famous Monty Python sketch ("Well, we have Spam, tomato & Spam, egg & Spam, Egg, bacon & Spam...") that was current when spam first began arriving on the Internet. Spam is a trademarked Hormel meat product that was well-known in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II.

## **Validity Claim (Habermas):**

Claim that a given statement is true, complete, sincere, or warranted.

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## Appendix 2: Rules of Use

These are "rules", "guidelines", "policies" and "conditions of use" as proclaimed and enforced - to a varying degree - by the three Web forums in this study.

### The Guardian Unlimited Talk (GUT)

- 1: From <http://www.guardian.co.uk/talkpolicy/>  
The "GUT Policy":

#### **Guardian Unlimited's talk policy**

We want The Talk to be the place on the net where you will always find lively, entertaining and, above all, intelligent discussions. The last thing the net needs is yet another site where any attempt at conversation is drowned out by a few people hurling mindless abuse at each other.

To make this happen, we will, very occasionally, remove some postings from our bulletin boards. We hope this doesn't seem heavy-handed, and to be honest we don't like doing it, but we believe it is the best way to keep the tone of The Talk right for the vast majority of the people who visit.

Why would we remove a message? There are four guidelines we would like you to be aware of:

1. We discourage obscenity and mindless abuse. Personal attacks on other users have no place in an intelligent discussion.
2. We will not tolerate racism, sexism or homophobia.
3. We will remove any content that may put us in legal jeopardy, such as potentially libellous or defamatory postings.
4. While we encourage a wide range of views, we will consider removing any content that other users might find extremely offensive or threatening.

If you act with maturity and consideration for other users, you should have no problems on our boards.

Remember that by registering for The Talk you have also agreed to our terms and conditions.

2: From <http://www.guardian.co.uk/article/0,5814,528402,00.html>

The "Terms and conditions of use" for the GUT:

### **Terms and conditions of use**

Guardian Newspapers Limited welcomes you to Guardian Unlimited, our digital information network. These are our terms and conditions for use of the network, which you may access in several ways, including but not limited to the World Wide Web, digital television and PDA. These terms and conditions apply whenever you access the network, on whatever device. In these terms and conditions, when we say Guardian Unlimited, we mean this network, regardless of how you access it.

By using the network, you are deemed to have accepted these conditions.

Some areas of Guardian Unlimited require registration. By completing the initial registration form and by entering your email address and password, you will be deemed to have accepted these terms and conditions. Also, by subscribing to any of our email services, you are deemed to have accepted these terms and conditions. If you register with Guardian Unlimited, you should read our privacy policy.

If you have registered with us and subsequently change your details, you should immediately notify us of any changes by emailing the user support team at [registration@guardianunlimited.co.uk](mailto:registration@guardianunlimited.co.uk).

Any changes we make to the terms and conditions will be reflected on this page.

#### **1. Registration**

When you register, you are registering as a personal user of Guardian Unlimited. Access to registration areas is via your email address and password.

We allow you access to the registration areas of the site on the basis that:

(i) your email address and password are personal to you and may not be used by anyone else to access Guardian Unlimited

(ii) you will not do anything which would assist anyone who is not a registered user to gain access to any registration area of Guardian Unlimited

(iii) you do not maliciously create additional registration accounts for the purpose of abusing the functionality of the site, or other users; nor do you seek to pass yourself off as another user

(iv) you comply with these terms and conditions.

If, for any reason, we believe that you have not complied with these requirements, we may, at our discretion, cancel your access to the registration areas of Guardian Unlimited immediately and without giving you any advance notice.

## 2. Termination of registration

If we wish to bring the agreement to an end, we will do so by emailing you at the address you have registered stating that the agreement has terminated. The agreement will terminate and your email address and password will become invalid on Guardian Unlimited immediately.

## 3. Use of material appearing on Guardian Unlimited

For the purposes of this agreement, "material" means material including, without limitation, text, video, graphics and sound material, published on the Guardian Unlimited network, whether copyright of Guardian Newspapers Limited or a third party.

You may download and print extracts from the material and make copies of these for your own personal and non-commercial use only. You are not allowed to download or print the material, or extracts from it, in a systematic or regular manner or otherwise so as to create a database in electronic or paper form comprising all or part of the material appearing on Guardian Unlimited.

You must not reproduce any part of Guardian Unlimited or the material or transmit it to or store it in any other website or disseminate any part of the material in any other form, unless we have indicated that you may do so.

Our content distribution system which you can find at [www.guardian.co.uk/headlineservices](http://www.guardian.co.uk/headlineservices) gives details of the manner in which we allow you to reproduce parts of our material on your site.

We may be prepared to allow you to distribute or reproduce other parts of Guardian Unlimited or the material in certain circumstances. Please email the user support team at [userhelp@guardian.co.uk](mailto:userhelp@guardian.co.uk) if you wish to apply for permission to do so.

## 4. Disclaimer of liability

To the extent permitted at law, we do not accept any responsibility for any statement in the material. You must not rely on any statement we have published on Guardian Unlimited without first taking specialist professional advice. Nothing in the material is provided for any specific purpose or at the request of any particular person.

For the avoidance of confusion, we will not be liable for any loss caused as a result of your doing, or not doing, anything as a result of viewing, reading or listening to the material or any part of it (except for death or personal injury attributable to our negligence and to the extent permitted at law).

You can access other sites via links from Guardian Unlimited. These sites are not under our control and we are not responsible in any way for any of their contents.

We give no warranties of any kind concerning Guardian Unlimited or the material. In particular, we do not warrant that Guardian Unlimited or any of its contents is virus free. You must take your own precautions in this respect as we accept no responsibility for any infection by virus or other contamination or by anything which has destructive properties.

## 5. Third party material on Guardian Unlimited

You will see advertising material submitted by third parties on Guardian Unlimited. Individual advertisers are solely responsible for the content of advertising material which they submit to us, including ensuring that it complies with relevant legislation. We accept no responsibility for the content of advertising material, including, without limitation, any error, omission or inaccuracy therein.

If you want to advertise on Guardian Unlimited, please email the user help team at [userhelp@guardian.co.uk](mailto:userhelp@guardian.co.uk), and they will pass your details on to our advertising sales team.

## 6. Submitting graphical material and photography for publication on Guardian Unlimited

When you send a photograph or other graphical material to us you do so in accordance with these Terms of service.

This means that you hereby agree that you have taken the photograph(s) you have sent to us or you have permission from or are authorised by the owner of the photograph(s) to send it (them) to us, and you are granting us a non-exclusive, royalty-free licence to publish or otherwise use the photograph(s) in any way and at any time we want on the Guardian Unlimited web site.

Selected photographs and graphical material will be published at the discretion of the editor and you will not be paid, even if your photograph(s) is (are) published.

We may cut, edit, crop or arrange your photograph(s) or graphic as we think fit to appear on the Guardian Unlimited web site, and we may remove your photograph(s) or graphics at any time.

Your name will be published alongside your photograph(s) or graphic, but we may edit or delete any comments which you submit along with your photograph(s) or graphic.

**IMPORTANT:** You or the owner of the photograph(s) still own the copyright in the photograph(s) sent to us and are free to republish the photograph(s) wherever you or the owner wish and in whatever medium you or the owner want.

## 7. Talk or discussion boards

Users of our site may submit material for publication in various areas of the site, including our Talk boards. We accept no liability in respect of any material submitted by users and published by us and we are not responsible for its content and accuracy.

If you want to submit material to us for publication on the Talk boards, you may do so on the following terms and conditions:

(i) publication of any material you submit to us will be at our sole discretion. We reserve the right to make additions or deletions to the text or graphics prior to publication, or to refuse publication

(ii) you grant us a non-exclusive, perpetual, royalty-free, worldwide licence to republish any material you submit to us in any format, including without limitation print and electronic format



(iii) you warrant to us that any material you submit to us is your own original work and that you own the copyright and any other relevant rights

(iv) you warrant that the material you submit is not obscene, offensive, defamatory of any person or otherwise illegal

(v) you agree not to post material which is deliberately intended to upset other users

(vi) you acknowledge that any breach of these warranties may cause us damage or loss and you agree to indemnify us in full and permanently against any third party liabilities, claims, costs, loss or damage we incur as a result of publishing material you submit to us, including consequential losses.

(vii) we reserve the right to remove your access to the Talk boards completely if we believe you are abusing the boards in any way.

All Talk users should read our Talk policy which expands on these points. The Talk policy can be found as a link from any pages within the Talk areas of Guardian Unlimited.

#### 8. Data protection

If you have indicated on the registration form that you wish to receive direct marketing material, your personal details will be included in a database compiled for direct marketing purposes. From time to time, you may receive direct marketing information from us or from third parties.

If you have indicated that you wish to receive email updates only from Guardian Unlimited, your personal details will be included on a database compiled for this specific purpose.

If you have indicated that you wish to receive direct marketing material or email updates from Guardian Unlimited but subsequently change your mind, you should notify the user support team at [registration@guardianunlimited.co.uk](mailto:registration@guardianunlimited.co.uk). As soon after this as is reasonably practicable, we will remove your name details from the relevant database.

#### 9. Variations

These terms may be varied from time to time. Please ensure that you review these terms and conditions regularly as you will be deemed to have accepted a variation if you continue to use the site after it has been posted. Details of variations will be posted in section 11 below.

#### 10. Force majeure

Although we will do our best to provide constant, uninterrupted access to Guardian Unlimited, we do not guarantee this. We accept no responsibility or liability for any interruption or delay.

#### 11. Governing Law & Jurisdiction

This agreement is governed by English law and the parties agree to submit to the exclusive jurisdiction of the English courts.

#### 12. Details of Variations.

None.

## The Spiegel Online Forum (SOF)

1: From <http://forum.spiegel.de/cgi-bin/WebX?13@@.ee6d458>

### Forums-Richtlinien

Das Forum ist ein Bestandteil von SPIEGEL ONLINE. Wir möchten, daß hier ein **offenes, freundschaftliches Diskussionsklima** herrscht. Bitte achten Sie darauf, in den Diskussionen einen fairen und sachlichen Ton zu wahren, auch wenn in der Sache einmal Streit aufkommt.

Um am Forum teilnehmen zu können, müssen Sie sich zunächst registrieren (Klick auf das Feld "Neuregistrierung").

Bitte beachten Sie auch, dass die Beiträge stets mit dem Thema der Diskussion zu tun haben sollen. Häufungen von off-topic-Inhalten innerhalb eines Stranges sind im Interesse aller daher dringend zu vermeiden. Beiträge von Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmern unterliegen der Moderation, daher können Verzögerungen beim Erscheinen auftreten. Darüber hinaus bitten wir, auf das Posten von Bildern zu verzichten, da sie häufig die Ladezeit unnötig verzögern; das Forum soll ein Medium für verbale Auseinandersetzung sein. Darüber hinaus sollten keine langen Kopien von Quellen gepostet werden, ein Link stattdessen ist ausreichend.

Eine Nutzung des Forums zu kommerziellen Zwecken ist nicht erlaubt. Die Redaktion behält sich vor, Beiträge, die **werblichen, strafbaren, beleidigenden oder anderweitig inakzeptablen** Inhalts sind, zu löschen bzw. sie nicht freizuschalten. Sollten Sie auf Beiträge stoßen, deren Inhalt Ihnen zweifelhaft erscheint, wenden Sie sich bitte an den Forumsmoderator.

Das **Copyright für die Beiträge**, soweit diese urheberrechtsschutzfähig sind, verbleibt grundsätzlich beim Verfasser, mit der naheliegenden Einschränkung, daß der Verfasser SPIEGEL ONLINE mit dem Einstellen seines Beitrags natürlich das Recht gibt, den Beitrag dauerhaft auf den Forumsseiten vorzuhalten. Jede Veröffentlichung der Forumsbeiträge durch Dritte bedarf jedoch der Zustimmung des Verfassers.

Ihr angegebene E-Mail-Adresse ist für andere Teilnehmer sichtbar, so dass Sie auch auf diesem Wege miteinander kommunizieren können.

Teilnehmer, die gegen die explizite Forums-Etikette oder die Grundprinzipien der 'Netiquette' verstoßen, können von der Teilnahme an den Diskussionen ausgeschlossen werden.

Die Forumssoftware akzeptiert einige "freie" Mailadressen nicht automatisch, da sich unter diesen häufig Störenfriede mit stets neuen Namen registrierten. Bei Fragen hierzu wenden Sie sich bitte an den Sysop/Moderator.

Mit der Teilnahme am Forum erkennen Sie die Richtlinien an. [...]

## Debattcentralen (DC)

1: From <http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Register.asp>

Velkommen til Aftenposten.nos Debattcentral!

Debattcentralen er stedet der du kan se hva andre lesere mener om aktuelle emner, delta i pågående diskusjoner eller selv starte en ny debatt om emner som opptar deg. Vi ber deg akseptere følgende regler:

Du er personlig ansvarlig for de debattinnleggene du skriver. Selv om Aftenposten.no vil overvåke debattene etter beste evne, vil vi ikke påta oss ansvar i forhold til eventuelle krav som måtte rettes mot forfatteren av et innlegg.

Det er ikke tillatt å publisere eller oppgi linker til innhold som strider mot norsk lov, opphavsretten eller på annen måte bryter med våre regler for god oppførsel.

Debattcentralen er et forum for meninger, ikke markedsføring. Innlegg som kun promoverer produkter eller kommersielle organisasjoner vil bli fjernet.

Innlegg i Debattcentralen godkjennes ikke på forhånd, men redaksjonen vil følge debattene underveis etter beste evne. Aftenposten.no forbeholder seg retten til når som helst å redigere eller slette upassende innlegg. I særlig alvorlige tilfeller har Aftenposten.no også rett til å stenge ute debattanter som gjentatte ganger har brutt reglene. Utestengte debattanter som gjentatte ganger registrerer seg med nye brukernavn og gjentar regelbrudd, kan bli utestengt på nytt uten videre varsel.

Innlegg i Debattcentralen er å regne som meningsytringer på linje med leserbrev, og honoreres ikke. Debattinnlegg kan også publiseres i Aftenpostens papiirutgave.

Du kan når som helst sende en epost til [debattleder@aftenposten.no](mailto:debattleder@aftenposten.no) dersom du ser et innlegg som du mener er upassende eller har andre kommentarer til redaksjonen.

2: From <http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Velkommen.htm>

## **Velkommen til Debattcentralen**

Brenner du inne med synspunkter du gjerne vil dele med andre? Send ditt innlegg nå, og du kan være med i aktuelle debatter - eller kanskje rett og slett være initiativtager til en ny diskusjonsgruppe.

Vi ber deg imidlertid følge visse regler i disse debattene: Hold deg til saken, ikke karakteriser motdebattanter eller andre personer, institusjoner og organisasjoner på en uhøflig eller sjikanøs måte. Unngå bannord og annen ordbruk som virker støtende. Fremsett ikke påstander du ikke har belegg for. Kort sagt: Bruk vanlig folkeskikk.

Redaksjonen påberoper seg rett til å redigere eller fjerne innlegg av injurierende art eller som på annen måte bryter med allmenn oppfatning av god tone.

Har du reaksjoner på eller meninger om innholdet i diskusjonsgruppene, send en mail til: [debattleder@aftenposten.no](mailto:debattleder@aftenposten.no)

## **Slik virker Debattcentralen**

I Debattcentralen skal du kunne si hva du mener om det meste. Du må registrere deg for å delta, men du forblir anonym i forhold til de andre brukerne. Vi ber deg imidlertid om å respektere våre regler for Debattcentralen:

### **Nettikette**

Hovedregelen er enkel: I Debattcentralen skal du kunne si hva du mener om det meste, men samtidig utvise respekt for de andre debattantene. Redaksjonen vil etter beste evne følge med på debatten og fjerne/redigere upassende innlegg, men du kan også tipse oss dersom du reagerer på et innlegg du mener er upassende. Det er redaksjonen som til enhver tid bestemmer hva som godtas eller ikke, men du er i din fulle rett til å protestere mot våre avgjørelser. Send i så fall en epost til [debattleader@aftenposten.no](mailto:debattleader@aftenposten.no).

Vi vil ikke tillate følgende:

### **Hets mot folkegrupper, rasisme eller andre injurierende innlegg.**

Innlegg med slikt eller lignende innhold som strider mot norsk lov eller alminnelig folkeskikk vil bli fjernet. Det samme gjelder lenker som viser til nettsteder med ulovlig innhold. Det er selvsagt lov å komme med synspunkter som ikke er i tråd med "folkemeningen" - dette er tross alt selve grunnlaget for en givende debatt - men det skal skje på en måte som ikke krenker andre.

### **Personangrep**

Selv om man er uenige, forventer vi at man behandler andre debattanter med respekt. Krenkende og nedsettende kommentarer om motparten er et tegn på at man selv er gått tom for argumenter, og vil bli fjernet. Ta ballen, ikke mannen!

### **Ryktespredning**

Vi vil ikke tillate ryktespredning om enkeltpersoner. Det er selvfølgelig tillatt å diskutere offentlige personer i kraft av deres verv på en saklig måte.

### **Reklame**

Innlegg som har til hensikt å reklamere for produkter, kommersielle bedrifter eller lignende vil bli fjernet.

### **Avskrift**

Debattcentralen er et forum for lesernes meninger. Lange utdrag fra andre publikasjoner vil bli fjernet av hensyn til opphavsretten.

### **Fremmedspråk**

Vi tillater kun innlegg på skandinaviske språk eller engelsk.

### **Tips og råd**

For å gjøre oppholdet i Debattcentralen så hyggelig som mulig for alle, anbefaler vi deg å følge disse reglene:

**Hold deg til temaet**

Ikke skift tema midt i en debatt - opprett heller en ny.

**Unngå "spamming"**

Ikke send identiske innlegg til mange forskjellige debatter.

**Unngå skriking**

Unngå å skrive innlegg med bare store bokstaver - det oppfattes som "skriking", og er slitsomt å lese. Unngå også å bruke flere utropstegn etc. enn nødvendig.

**Skriv kort**

Erfaringer tilsier at de lengste innleggene blir minst lest. Maks.-lengden for innlegg er 5000 tegn (ca. 2 A4-ark). Det lønner seg å legge inn flere korte innlegg fremfor ett langt.

**Anonymitet**

Det er bare redaksjonen som kjenner din epost-adresse, og vi anbefaler ikke å oppgi denne til andre debattanter i Debattcentralen. Dersom du likevel ønsker å kommunisere direkte med andre debattanter, kan du evt. opprette en anonym epostadresse (á la Hotmail). Unngå å oppgi adresse eller telefonnummer - vi kan dessverre ikke garantere at noen ikke vil misbruke dette.

**Bruksanvisning**

[...]

**Tips om upassende innlegg**

Dersom du ser et innlegg du mener er strider mot våre regler, ser vi gjerne at du varsler oss ved å trykke på Er innlegget upassende? Tips oss i det aktuelle innleggets tittel-linje. Det er viktig at du lar linken bli stående i eposten, slik at vi kan finne igjen det omstridte innlegget.

**Beskjeder til Aftenposten.no**

Dersom du ønsker å sende en epost til Aftenposten Interaktiv angående diskusjonssiden sender du denne til [debattcentralen@aftenposten.no](mailto:debattcentralen@aftenposten.no).

## Appendix 3A: Statistical summary of survey results

This appendix summarises quantifiable data collected through what has been referred to as the "online surveys" or "questionnaires" throughout the thesis. The questionnaires were presented to users of *The Guardian Unlimited Talk* (GUT), *Spiegel Online Forum* (SOF) and *Debattcentralen* (DC), and can be found here:

GUT	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/index/talk/">http://www.guardian.co.uk/index/talk/</a>	(English)
SOF	<a href="http://forum.spiegel.de">http://forum.spiegel.de</a>	(German)
DC	<a href="http://debatt.aftenposten.no">http://debatt.aftenposten.no</a>	(Norwegian)

The corresponding online forms (questionnaires) can be found here (as well as on the attached CD - i.e. Appendix 3C):

GUT	<a href="http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Guardian/quest-eng.html">http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Guardian/quest-eng.html</a>
SOF	<a href="http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Spiegel/quest-ger.html">http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Spiegel/quest-ger.html</a>
DC	<a href="http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Aftenposten/quest-nor.html">http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Aftenposten/quest-nor.html</a>

The forms are different in language, but - as far as possible - equal in content. I must point out one question that has been especially difficult to translate: Question 5 (Level of Education). As there are different education systems in the given countries, it is hard / impossible to translate names that would correspond to exactly the same educational levels. Therefore, I decided to use categories that are *as close as possible* (see forms). All the forms were thoroughly tested and validated before application.

The numbers of respondents reflect the different approaches that I was allowed to use to approach potential respondents (see Methods chapter).

Besides in DC, where participants of all types of debates were asked to contribute, I chose to target only political debates with my requests of participation. Because of that, I split the replies given by the DC-respondents into two categories: Sports and Politics. The selection was based on the respondents' own answers to survey question 14-1 (types of discussions mostly participating in). To make the numbers comparative, I chose to remove the few GUT and SOF replies that did not fall into the Politics category. Any other categories would have been too small to include (in volume of replies).

Table 1 shows the amounts of valid replies, sorted after forum and type of discussion mostly participated in (Given by self-declaration, question 14-1).

Table 1: Valid replies to questionnaires (n)

GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
53	124	124	117

Respondents that sent multiple replies have had all but their last response removed (identification by IP-address and time of submitting). The same goes for empty replies.

**These absolute numbers (Table 1) lay the basis for the relative representations in the following tables. Where the sum of percentage-points amounts to slightly less or more than hundred, the reason is rounding (e.g.: three thirds of 100% are represented by three times 33%, in sum only 99%).**

The numbers, of course, reflect attributes from a *sample* of forum users, and can therefore not necessarily be interpreted as indicators for whole populations (as average Briton, German or Norwegian, or even average users of the forums). The



respondents were selected through three levels: 1) Self selection to participate in the given forum, 2) slightly selective exposure to the request to participate, and 3) self selection by choice to participate.

Many of these tables should be accompanied with the corresponding questions in the questionnaire, to be fully understood.

Table 2: Question 01 - Gender

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Male	79%	86%	81%	92 %
Female	21%	14%	19%	8 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3: Question 02 - Age category (in years)

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
10-19	2%	2%	7%	8 %
20-29	34%	31%	27%	58 %
30-39	32%	24%	23%	28 %
40-49	17%	19%	19%	3 %
50-59	13%	11%	12%	2 %
60-69	0%	8%	8%	1 %
70-79	2%	4%	3%	0 %
SUM	100%	99%	99%	100%

Although age categories above 79 years were part of the questionnaire, none of the respondents selected these categories.

Table 4: Question 03 - Primary Language

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
English	85%	0%	1%	0 %
French	0%	0%	2%	0 %
German	6%	89%	0%	0 %
Italian	0%	2%	0%	0 %
Scandinavian	6%	1%	85%	99 %
Spanish	2%	0%	3%	0 %
Other	2%	9%	9%	1 %
SUM	101%	101%	100%	100%

Table 5: Question 04 - Secondary Language(s) comfortable to use in debate

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
English	15%	87%	71%	66 %
French	21%	23%	4%	1 %
German	15%	11%	14%	3 %
Italian	2%	6%	1%	0 %
Scandinavian	4%	0%	9%	1 %
Spanish	9%	15%	4%	0 %
No other	32%	3%	7%	22 %
Other(s)	11%	13%	3%	1 %
Avg.*	0.77	1.54	1.05	0.71

\* Note: "Avg." stands for average number of secondary languages that the respondents feel comfortable to use in a debate forum. As the category "Other(s)" may represent more than one language, the average value may be slightly lower than it should. The higher the "Other(s)" value is, the more uncertain the "Avg." value is.

Another aspect to take into concern is that "comfortable to use" is not the same as knowing the language, or understanding it. It merely shows the respondents personal sense of comfort by using a given language in a debate.

Table 6: Question 03+04 - Languages that the respondents may want to use in debate

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
English	100%	87%	72%	66 %
French	21%	23%	6%	1 %
German	21%	100%	14%	3 %
Italian	2%	7%	1%	0 %
Scandinavian	9%	1%	94%	100 %
Spanish	11%	15%	7%	0 %
Other(s)	13%	22%	12%	2 %

This table reflects the actual possibility of respondents to use the given languages in debates (sum of primary languages and secondary languages comfortable to use). DC is a multilingual forum, which accepts postings in Scandinavian (Norwegian, Swedish, Danish) and English. This is probably the reason why "only" 94% of the DC Politics -respondents can use Scandinavian languages, although it mainly is a Scandinavian forum. I suspect that the high number of "Other(s)" amongst SOF-respondents is heavily influenced by Russian, as many former East-Germans learned Russian as secondary language.

Table 7: Question 05 - Educational level

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Primary	4%	17%	6%	9 %
Secondary	15%	23%	32%	51 %
Bachelor	42%	18%	40%	29 %
Master	28%	33%	17%	9 %
Doc (PhD)	11%	9%	5%	1 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	99%

As already mentioned: As there are different educational systems in the given countries, it is hard / impossible to translate names that would correspond to exactly the same educational levels. Therefore, I decided to use categories that are as close as possible (see online forms for further details).

Table 8: Question 06-1 - Political Interest

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Below average	0%	0%	2%	13 %
Average	11%	32%	23%	61 %
Above average	89%	68%	75%	26 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 9: Question 06-2 - Political Activity

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Not active	75%	85%	64%	93 %
Member of political organisation / party	25%	15%	27%	5 %
Holding political position, by election	0%	1%	9%	2 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	0%	0%	1%	0 %
SUM	100%	101%	101%	100%

Table 10: Question 06-3 - News Update

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Rarely	0%	0%	0%	0 %
Sporadically	2%	3%	5%	4 %
Frequently	98%	96%	93%	96 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	0%	1%	2%	0 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 11: Question 07 - Participation in other online forums

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Yes	34%	44%	59%	53 %
No	66%	56%	41%	47 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 12: Question 09 - General evaluation of other's postings in forum

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Valuable & Informative	98%	81%	79%	88 %
I gain knowledge	92%	60%	60%	82 %
Convince to change my opinion	45%	48%	16%	17 %
Personally offended	47%	29%	19%	15 %
Mostly high quality	19%	16%	12%	26 %
Some too complicated	11%	9%	5%	5 %
Display lack of knowledge	75%	51%	79%	53 %
Based on wrong assumptions	74%	48%	63%	39 %
Sabotage the discussion	72%	45%	40%	55 %

Table 13: Question 10 - General evaluation of own postings in forum

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Convince others	58%	44%	46%	41 %
Support others' P	70%	39%	52%	69 %
Oppose others' P	81%	28%	57%	51 %
Explain background	60%	54%	60%	58 %
Contribute with knowledge	79%	44%	72%	80 %
Defend & Explain own opinion	83%	14%	56%	61 %
Release frustration	45%	9%	36%	36 %
Rhetoric, stimulating quest.	62%	47%	59%	34 %
Ask for answers	77%	42%	44%	79 %

Table 14: Question 11 - Anonymity

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Participate anonymously	85%	61%	85%	68 %
Anonymity is important for free part.	74%	56%	71%	49 %
Non-an. postings display higher quality	28%	83%	35%	36 %

Table 15: Question 12 - Ideal Speech Situation

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Feel free...	87%	70%	85%	97 %
Sense coercion	23%	19%	17%	4 %

Table 16: Question 13-1 - Reflexive Structure, Experienced misunderstandings or disagreements that may have resulted from forum's structure or user-interface.

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
No, never	38%	40%	43%	54 %
Yes, sometimes	47%	44%	40%	38 %
Yes, often	11%	4%	2%	1 %
Don't know / understand the Q.	4%	11%	15%	7 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	0%	2%	0%	0 %
SUM	100%	101%	100%	100%

Table 17: Question 13-2 - Reflexive Structure, Experienced misunderstandings or disagreements that may have resulted from implicit (unclear) presuppositions.

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
No, never	0%	11%	11%	20 %
Yes, sometimes	53%	61%	54%	55 %
Yes, often	40%	12%	23%	6 %
Don't know / understand the Q.	8%	14%	12%	20 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	0%	2%	0%	0 %
SUM	101%	100%	100%	101%

Table 18: Question 13-3 - Reflexive Structure, Links to external resources

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Impossible	2%	2%	12%	15 %
Hard	2%	12%	9%	4 %
Easy	74%	44%	34%	35 %
Don't know, haven't tried	21%	36%	41%	43 %
Don't know what links are	2%	3%	4%	3 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	0%	3%	0%	0 %
SUM	101%	100%	100%	100%

Table 19: Question 14-2 - Average frequency of submitting post(s) to forum

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Daily	55%	12%	25%	40 %
Weekly	30%	48%	48%	41 %
Less than once per week	13%	40%	27%	19 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	2%	0%	0%	0 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 20: Question 14-3 - Motivation to visit the forum

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Links from online paper	0%	23%	15%	1 %
Own initiative	72%	43%	54%	64 %
Check for answers on own postings	25%	8%	21%	18 %
Other	4%	27%	10%	17 %
SUM	101%	101%	100%	100 %

Table 21: Question 15-1 - Familiarity with local Policies and Rules

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Don't know anything about them	9%	39%	20%	17 %
Read them, but forgot	15%	12%	10%	15 %
Know them vaguely	45%	26%	27%	37 %
Read, but didn't understand	2%	0%	0%	1 %
Read, remember and understand	28%	23%	44%	31 %
SUM	99%	100%	101%	101 %

Table 22: Question 15-2 - Opinion of local Policies and Rules

	GUT Politics	SOF Politics	DC Politics	DC Sports
Necessary, I accept	81%	74%	84%	87 %
Too strict, but I accept	11%	8%	7%	3 %
Too strict, I don't accept	6%	6%	6%	6 %
Unaccounted (not replied)	2%	12%	3%	3 %
SUM	100%	100%	100%	99%





## Appendix 3B: Interviews with forum moderators

These are transcripts of interviews with the three forum moderators, conducted by e-mail in three rounds between Nov. 2002 and May 2003. Regrettably, not all forum moderators had the capacity to carry out all the three interview rounds (because of "time constrains"). Thus, only the *Debattcentralen* (DC) moderator has completed all three rounds, the *Spiegel Online Forum* (SOF) moderator the first two, and the *Guardian Unlimited Talk* (GUT) moderator only the first one. As requested by some of the moderators, I have chosen not to disclose their identities.

### Interview #1 with GUT moderator

**SIMON** Please describe your work with the Talk forum. What are your tasks, challenges, and what does your practical work normally consist of?

**GUARDIAN  
UNLIMITED  
TALK** The talk boards are only part of my job description. Myself and the other moderators check the boards as often and as regularly as possible we also respond to complaints emailed in by users of the web site.

**SIMON** What rules / guidelines (explicit and implicit) must the participants of the debate follow to be allowed to participate?

**GUARDIAN  
UNLIMITED  
TALK** A copy of our talk policy can be found at:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/talkpolicy/0,5540,66799,00.html>

Users are also expected to our terms and conditions which can be found at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/article/0,5814,528402,00.html>

especially point 6:

[That is, point 7 - referred in whole. Please see the GUT "Terms and conditions of use" in Appendix 2]

**SIMON** If those rules or guidelines are broken by a participant, what sanctions can he / she expect? Are there different levels of sanctions for different types of rule breaking?

**GUARDIAN UNLIMITED TALK** As far as dealing with users who break the rules there is a set procedure of warning them once and then banning them from the site. However, we do appreciate that some users may not maliciously set out to break the policy in which case we may simply place a policy reminder onto the boards.

**SIMON** How are these rules governed by you? Is it often necessary with strict sanctions? Would you say that users generally are good at following Guardian's explicit rules and general netiquette? Are there some types of discussions where breaking of rules occurs more often than in other discussions (e.g. Sports vs. Politics)?

**GUARDIAN UNLIMITED TALK** Most users are very good at staying within the talk policy but it is possible for a small number to ruin the boards for everyone else so we are quite strict especially if we are emailed with complaints against certain users. Posters on boards such as Travel, Film and Books tend to be well behaved this is partly due to the nature of those boards. The News and Politics talk boards attract the most problems.

**SIMON** Does it seem like users like to stay anonymous? Does it happen that users uncover their name, gender, or contact information in a debate? If yes, does this happen often? Can you see any general difference in the response of anonymous postings, vs. non-anonymous postings? Are non-anonymous users treated any different than other users?

**GUARDIAN  
UNLIMITED  
TALK**

Most users choose to stay anonymous and prefer this to using their real names. However, sometimes they forget they are anonymous and try to claim another user is slandering them. Users can choose whether to allow their email address to be visible to other users and some choose to do.

Although some users will post with real sounding names we have no way of knowing if these are their actual names. It would appear that users are more free with their views than they would be if they were posting under their real names, although it is hard to tell as we do not know if we have any users posting under their real names.



## Interview #1 with SOF moderator

- SIMON** Beschreiben Sie ihre Arbeit mit dem Spiegel Online Forum. Was sind Ihre praktischen Aufgaben und Herausforderungen? Wie sieht Ihr typischer Arbeitstag mit dem Forum aus?
- SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Meine Aufgabe ist es, die Diskussionen im Forum zu starten - also Themen auszudenken/vorzugeben, meist natürlich im Zusammenhang mit Artikeln, Kommentaren oder Reportagen. Ich schreibe die Teaser, stelle die Eingangsfragen und Sorge dafür, dass die Diskussionen auf den Seiten "präsent" sind (Icon/Logo im Beitrag) und aktualisieren entsprechend die Forums-Centerpage. Der Arbeitstag entsprechend: Sichten der Themen (Konferenz morgens), Vorschläge machen/absprechen mit den Ressorts, freischalten/lesen von moderierten Beiträgen, lesen der übrigen Beiträge, eventuell Kommentare wenn nötig, etc.
- SIMON** Welche Regeln (explizit und implizit) müssen die Nutzer des Forums folgen um teilnehmen zu dürfen.
- SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Teilnehmer/innen müssen in Ton und Inhalt andere Teilnehmer/innen respektieren, die Beiträge dürfen nicht beleidigend, hetzerisch, denunziatorisch sein, keine Straftatbestände erfüllen, und sie müssen eindeutig zum Thema gehören. Sie sollten auch "eigenen Inhalts" sein, also keine Kopien von irgendwelchen Buch/Zeitschriftenartikel sein etc.
- SIMON** Welche Repressalien riskiert ein Nutzer der diese Regeln bricht? Gibt es unterschiedliche Stufen an Sanktionen für verschiedene Regelbrüche?
- SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Meistens wird er/sie erstmal ermahnt, sich an die Forum-Netiquette zu halten, verwerfliche Beiträge werden von mir gelöscht. Eventuell kann ein Teilnehmer nach Freischaltung auch wieder der Moderation unterworfen werden. Beiträge von moderierten Teilnehmern, die ich vorher lese und die eindeutig die Kriterien unter 2) erfüllen, erscheinen natürlich gar nicht erst.

**SIMON**

Wie werden die Regeln in Praxis hantiert? Sind strenge Sanktionen öfters notwendig? Würden sie sagen dass die Nutzer generell explizite und implizite Regeln (wie Netiquette) folgen? Sind manche Arten an Diskussionsforen öfters von Regelbrüchen heimgesucht als andere (z.B. Sport im Vergleich zu Politik).

**SPIEGEL  
ONLINE  
FORUM**

Die Regeln werden zum allergrößten Teil respektiert. Sanktionen sind eher die Ausnahme. Es geht naturgemäß "rauer" in politischen Diskussionen zu, weniger bei Sport oder Kultur.

**SIMON**

Scheint es ihnen dass Nutzer sich generell gerne anonym halten? Kommt es vor dass Nutzer ihren richtigen Namen, Alter oder sogar Adresse / Telefonnummer offen teilen? Glauben Sie dass die Glaubwürdigkeit und Schwere eines Teilnehmers in der Debatte annimmt in dem er offen mit seinem Namen hervorsteht? Glauben sie dass die Qualität der Debatte generell steigt in dem die Nutzer nicht anonym sind?

**SPIEGEL  
ONLINE  
FORUM**

Die meisten Teilnehmer bleiben lieber anonym, doch darunter leidet die Qualität der Beiträge nicht. Die größten Flegel sind natürlich stets anonym, und wer mit seinem offenbar "richtigen" Namen debattiert, äußert sich in aller Regel tadellos. Der Austausch von Telefonnummern und Adressen erfolgt meistens per e-mail, zwischen Teilnehmer/innen, die auf diesem Wege weiterdiskutieren oder Kontakte knüpfen wollen. Ich glaube nicht, dass sich in jedem Fall die "Echtheit" eines Namens verifizieren lässt.

## Interview #2 with SOF moderator

**SIMON** Haben Sie je Klagen / Feedback von Teilnehmern des Forums empfangen, wegen der Regeln die für das Spiegel Online Forum gelten, oder die Art wie diese Regeln praktiziert werden?

**SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Ja, sicher. Die meisten unserer Foren-Besucherinnen und -Besucher sind erfahrene Internet-User und damit sehr selbstbewusst. Und Kritikpunkte gibt es bekanntlich immer, aber damit verbunden auch immer Vorschläge und Anregungen. Gemessen an der Masse der Nutzerinnen und Nutzer ist die Kritik aber sehr gering.

**SIMON** Haben Sie je Klagen / Feedback von Teilnehmern des Forums empfangen, wegen der Struktur oder dem User-Interface des Spiegel Online Forums?

**SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Ja, siehe oben - aber auch hier überwiegt die konstruktive Kritik.

**SIMON** Gibt es klare Kategorien in die man Teilnehmer einordnen könnte? Gibt es klare Merkmale unter den Teilnehmern, in der Art und Weise in der das Forum genutzt wird? Wenn ja, welche Kategorien an Nutzern sehen Sie im Spiegel Online Forum?

**SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Wie schon gesagt, das Profil ist eher niveauevoll, gebildet, erfahren im Umgang mit den "Neuen Medien" und dem Internet. Leichte "männliche Mehrheit". Die meisten sind bereits gut informiert und steuern eine Menge Fakten, Links und Argumente bei. Es sind überwiegend Privatleute, aber auch Wissenschaftler oder sonstige "Profis".

**SIMON** Haben Sie je bewusste Sabotage der Debatte im Spiegel Online Forum erlebt?

**SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Ja, kam vor. In letzter Zeit allerdings nicht mehr.

**SIMON** Wenn ja, wie haben sie diese Situation hantiert?

**SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Ich habe die Moderation für neue Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmer eingeführt. Nach und nach werden diese dann "freigeschaltet". Dadurch ergab sich eine Schwelle, die aggressive oder destruktive Postings abfedert.

**SIMON** Meinen Sie dass manche Teilnehmer hauptsächlich in der Debatte teilnehmen um Frustration loszuwerden?

**SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Diese Motivation ist sicher hier und da zu beobachten. Manche nutzen das Forum täglich, sicher auch manchmal mit missionarischem Eifer oder aus Frust. Oder auch aus sozialem Bedürfnis, wie es auch für manche Chaträume gilt. Bei uns ist die Motivation aber eher über die Themen sowie die Möglichkeit, auf andere gut informierte, kompetente Diskussionspartner zu treffen, die "es auch wert sind" , sich mit ihnen zu streiten.

**SIMON** Wenn ja, nähmen solche Teilnehmer in dem Dialog teil, und beantworten Antworten die sie von anderen Teilnehmern bekommen haben, oder schicken sie eher starke Meinungen ohne Interesse im Austausch von Wissen und Meinung mit Anderen zu zeigen?

**SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Eher suchen sie die Auseinandersetzung. Das bloße von Posten von Statement geschieht meist bei neuen Themen durch neue Teilnehmerinnen/Teilnehmer, bei aktuellen "Aufregern". Dauerthemen gehören auch den Ausdauernden :-)

**SIMON** Wissen Sie ob die Internet-version vom Spiegel oder Spiegel Online Forum in Teilen der Welt zensuriert wird?

**SPIEGEL ONLINE FORUM** Darüber liegen mir persönlich keine Erkenntnisse vor.



**SIMON** Wissen Sie ob es Teilnehmer im Forum gibt die vom Ausland teilnehmen. Wenn ja, wissen Sie von welchen Ländern solche Nutzer teilnehmen? Haben Sie einen Log der anzeigt von wo die Teilnehmer sind (z.B. IP - Adresse)?

**SPIEGEL  
ONLINE  
FORUM** Sicher nehmen manche auch an internationalen Foren teil, aber weitere Erkenntnisse darüber habe ich nicht oder verfolge keine Informationen darüber.

**SIMON** Ist es möglich Links zu externen Internet-Seiten in Beiträgen zu kreieren? Wieso / wieso nicht?

**SPIEGEL  
ONLINE  
FORUM** Ja, das ist möglich - wir weisen jedoch darauf hin, dass dies stets außer Verantwortung der Redaktion für deren Inhalt geschieht.



## Interview #1 with DC moderator

**SIMON** Beskriv din rolle som "debattleder". Hva er dine oppgaver, utfordringer, og hva består det praktiske arbeidet som regel av?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Debattlederen står for den daglige redaksjonelle driften av Debattcentralen. Dvs. at overvåker debattene, sensurerer innlegg ihht. våre regler og kommer med innspill dersom det er nødvendig. Debattleleder er en journalistisk stilling.

Debattleleder starter gjerne dagen med å gå gjennom førstesiden på aftenposten.no og finne saker som egner seg spesielt godt til debatt - ut fra klassiske journalistiske kriterier. Ofte er lesere allerede i gang med å debattere en gitt sak - i så fall linker vi fra saken til debatten. Andre ganger starter vi selv debatt med utgangspunkt i en av våre saker.

Ut over dagen overvåker vi aktiviteten på debattsidene, og luker vekk innlegg som bryter med våre regler. Sensur skjer delvis på eget initiativ, delvis som følge av klager fra lesere.

**SIMON** Hvilken regler (skrevne og uskrevne) må deltakerne av Aftenpostens debattsider følge for å kunne delta?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Vi har tre skrevne sett med regler. De to første finner du til høyre på forsiden <http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Group.asp>, linkene "Velkommen til Debattcentralen" og "Bruksanvisning". Det tredje settet er i prinsippet en kortversjon av disse, som du presenteres for når du registrerer deg som ny bruker på <http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Register.asp>. Du må krysse av for at du har lest og akseptert disse reglene for å få tilsendt passord.

Vi opererer i grunnen ikke med uskrevne regler, men det er klart at det finnes en egen "nettikette", en kultur blant internettbrukere, som de aller fleste kjenner til - og forholder seg til. Stikkordet er rett og slett vanlig folkeskikk.

**SIMON** Dersom enkelte av disse reglene blir brutt, hvilke represalier risikerer en bruker da? Finnes det ulike grader av represalier for ulike typer regelbrudd?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Ja. Det finnes tre (egentlig fire) sanksjonsmetoder:

1) Redigering av innlegg. Debattleder kan når som helst gå inn i et innlegg og redigere dette. Innlegget vil bli merket med en liten tekst nederst, som viser at dette er gjort. I praksis bruker vi ikke denne metoden lenger - av kapasitetsgrunner. Hvis vi finner en setning eller vending som bryter med våre regler, blir hele innlegget slettet.

2) Sletting av hele innlegg. Ingen videre følger.

3) Sletting av innlegg med advarsel. Hele innlegget blir slettet, og samtidig sendes en automatisk epost til innsenderen med en advarsel om at gjentatte regelbrudd av denne typen kan føre til utestengelse. Dette skjer ved grove regelbrudd eller gjentagelse.

4) Utestengelse. Innsenderen blir sperret og kan ikke sende inn flere innlegg til Debattcentralen. Dette skjer i hovedsak kun dersom vedkommende har fått flere advarsler uten å skjerpe seg, eller hvis det er åpenbart at innsenderen bare er ute etter å sabotere. Pr. 1. oktober er 29 av ca. 20.000 registrerte brukere blitt utestengt.

**SIMON** Hvordan blir reglene håndhevet i praksis? Er det ofte nødvendig med strenge represalier for regelbrudd? Vil du si at brukerne generelt er flinke med å følge de eksplisitte reglene til Aftenposten, og de implisitte reglene som finnes (nettiquette)? Er det noen diskursjoner der regelbrudd oftere forekommer enn i andre (f.eks. Sport vs. Politikk)?

## DEBATT- CENTRALEN

Vår kapasitet er dessverre begrenset, og det er derfor ikke mulig å følge alle debatter like tett. Nå må det sies at enkelte debatter er mer "harmnløse" enn andre, og gir rom for en annen takthøyde. Ta f.eks. sportsdebatter, der det er vanlig med litt sarkasme og spydige kommentarer. I slike grupper vil det, i det minste etter en stund, utvikle seg en kultur og gjensidig forståelse blant debattantene. Dvs. at man godtar litt tøys og tull og ufinheter, men kan "gjøre opp" etterpå som venner. I ytterste konsekvens vil gruppen av debattanter, interessant nok, utvikle sitt eget "hierarki" og egen kutyme, og faktisk drive en egensensur som virker ganske godt. Det beste eksempelet på dette er kanskje ishockeydebatten, som er godt etablert. De fleste debattantene "kjenner hverandre" (riktignok bare via Debattcentralen) og godtar en viss grad av spydigheter etc. fra andre uten varig mén. Nye brukere som kommer inn og bryter kraftig med det som er godtatt tone etc. vil i mange tilfeller bli satt på plass på en konstruktiv måte av "veteranene", uten at redaksjonen behøver å gripe inn.

Motsatsen til sportsdebattene finner vi som regel i politiske debatter, spesielt Midtøsten-debatten og innvandringsdebatten. Dette er de debattene som krever strengest overvåking, det er mange deltagere med kontroversielle synspunkter, og svært lite rom for ironi og sarkasme. Her finner vi de fleste regelbruddene. Flere av deltagerne har store problemer med å holde seg til konstruktiv debattteknikk, de er ofte ikke interessert i dialog og eksploderer nærmest dersom de blir sensurert.

Nettikette avhenger ofte av brukerens erfaring med slike sider, og er noe som læres etter hvert. Brudd mot eksplisitte regler forekommer ikke så ofte. Det dreier seg som oftest enten om ekstremister som ikke bryr seg om regler i noe tilfelle, eller om brukere som er vant til debattsider med et annet generelt nivå på debatten, ofte debattsider uten noen form for sensur. Ad strenge sanksjoner: Som sagt er 29 av 20.000 brukere stengt ute i det året Debattcentralen har eksistert (i ny drakt - vi hadde et annet debattsystem før). Det mener vi er lite.

**SIMON**

Virker det som om brukerne liker å holde seg anonyme? Hender det at brukere forteller om sitt navn, kjønn eller e-post adresse / tel.nummer? I så fall, skjer dette ofte? Kan du se noen forskjell på den responsen anonyme brukere får i diskursjonene, i forhold til de som ikke velger å være anonyme?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN**

Vi har faktisk oppfordret brukerne til å være anonyme hvis de deltar i kontroversielle debatter - bare for å sikre oss mot at ekstremister forfølger motdebattanter personlig (vi har IKKE opplevd at så har skjedd). Noen bruker likevel sitt egentlige navn.

Det er klart at anonymitet er viktig for mange. Brukerne tør å si hva de mener - på godt og vondt. Det positive er at debatten ofte blir mer spontan og ærligere. Det negative er selvfølgelig at useriøse elementer blir fristet til å boltre seg med "spam" og sabotasje.

I noen grad vil jeg nok si at brukere som opererer under fullt navn kan få noe mer tyngde i debatten. På den annen side kan ingen garantere at de bruker sitt virkelige navn, selv om det virker slik.

## Interview #2 with DC moderator

**SIMON** Har du noensinne mottatt klager eller tilbakemeldinger fra debatt-deltagere, angående reglene som gjelder Debattcentralen, eller måten reglene er blitt håndhevet på? Hvis ja, hva bestod disse av?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Vi har bedt om kommentarer, og får det jevnlig. En del finner du her:

<http://debatt.aftenposten.no/Thread.asp?GroupID=15&Group=Om%20Debattcentralen>

Annet kommer inn på epost. Jeg kan ikke huske å ha mottatt klager på reglene i seg selv, men en del reagerer på å bli sensurert. Mennesker med sterke meninger, som er overbevist om at deres personlige syn samsvarer med de objektive fakta i en gitt sak, reagerer naturlig nok når vi tillater oss å slette deres "fakta" Det kan være "sannheter" som "alle muslimer er voldelige", "alle Israelkritikere er antisemitter", "alle FrP'ere er rasister" etc. (ikke ordrette sitater!).

Mange hevder at redaksjonen er partisk den ene eller andre veien. Dette har skjedd spesielt ofte i Israel-debatten, der de vi kan kalle "Israelvennene" mener redaksjonen bidrar til å spre antisemittisme ved å tillate kritikk av staten Israel. Omvendt blir vi også kritisert av enkelte på "den andre siden" for å la "Israelvennene" spre sitt budskap, som etter deres mening er anti-muslimsk propaganda.

Noen er også vant til andre debattfora på nett, der debatten foregår så å si usensurert. De er vant til en useriøs tone, mer i retning av "chatting" enn debatt, som de tar med seg inn på våre sider. Da kan de bli overrasket når vi fjerner det mest useriøse stoffet - dvs. innlegg som ikke egentlig er debattinnlegg, men mer "tidsfordriv" ( i mangel av et bedre ord).

**SIMON** Har du noensinne mottatt klager eller tilbakemeldinger fra debatt-deltagere, angående strukturen eller bruker-grensesnittet til Debattcentralen?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** En del av disse vil du også finne under linken over. DC er ganske enkelt, uten mange flotte funksjoner. Noen er vant til debattfora der du for eksempel har mulighet til å legge inn bilde av deg selv, logoer, direkte linker til andre nettadresser, personlige opplysninger m.m.

Vi har valgt å kjøre en ganske enkel design for å unngå mye "krimskrams" på siden - det er teksten som skal stå i sentrum. Personlige opplysninger ber vi folk være litt forsiktige med å oppgi - det kan jo tenkes at noen ville misbruke slike opplysninger.

Ett problem ved grensesnittet er at det bygger på en såkalt "flat" struktur - dvs. at alle innlegg kommer under hverandre i kronologisk rekkefølge. Brukere som er vant til et "trådet" forum må venne seg til en ny struktur.

**SIMON** Finnes det klare typer / kategorier av brukere i Debattcentralen? Skiller noen seg ut på en sånn måte at det er mulig å kategorisere dem i grupper? Hvis ja, hvilken typer av brukere ser du i debatten?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Ja.  
Grovt sett kan vi dele brukerne inn i:

Chatterne: Gjerne yngre gutter (10-25 år) som bruker siden til å diskutere løst og fast, evt. samlet rundt ett spesielt emne. Eksempler her finner du i hockey-gruppen og engelsk fotball. Det er ikke så mye debatt i dyptpløyende forstand, men mer lette diskusjoner, småprat, utveksling av kommentarer om gårsdagens kamp etc. etc.

De taletrengte: Brukere som surfer rundt på siden på jakt etter noe å mene noe om. Er gjerne først ute når vi starter en debatt, ikke nødvendigvis fordi de har noen spesielt sterk eller nøyte gjennomtenkt mening, men fordi de gjerne vil skrive noe.



Misjonærene: Folk med brennende engasjement for en spesifikk sak eller holdning. Se for eksempel Midtøsten-debatten. Vil kaste seg inn i alle debatter som angår dette tema. Veldig aktive - noen til alle døgnets tider.

Provokatørene: Folk som egentlig ikke mener så mye, men som synes det er moro å kaste brannfakler og se hva som skjer.

Men i bunnen ligger selvfølgelig den store, grå massen av "vanlige" mennesker som melder seg når vi debatterer noe de synes er interessant, og som kikker innom innimellom.

**SIMON** Har du noensinne opplevd bevisst sabotasje av diskusjoner i Debattcentralen?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Ja. Det hender enkelte går inn for å sabotere, enten fordi de har deltatt i debatten og så sluppet opp for argumenter, eller rett og slett fordi de kjeder seg. Her snakker vi om generell drittsslenging mot andre debattanter.

Det har også vært enkeltepisoder der en ung fyr sendte inn det samme innlegget (et helt meningsløst sådant) til samtlige debatter. Dette var generert ved hjelp av et Java-script.

**SIMON** Hvis ja, hvordan reagerte du på dette?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** De førstnevnte tilfellene blir behandlet som vanlige regelbrudd. Vi sletter innleggene og sender et par advarsler. Alt etter regelbruddets alvorlighetsgrad og frekvens velger vi så å stenge brukeren ute fra forumet.

Det siste eksempelet vurderte vi som sabotasje nær grensen mot hacking. I tillegg til å slette og stenge brukeren ute sporet vi derfor opp gjerningsmannen - og ringte ham.

**SIMON** Mener du at noen deltagere hovedsakelig bruker Debattcentralen for å "slippe ut trykk" rundt saker som frustrerer dem?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Absolutt.

**SIMON** Hvis ja, viser slike brukere faktisk interesse i dialogen, og svarer konstruktivt på svar som de har pådratt seg fra andre brukere? Eller sender de heller innlegg uten å vise interesse i utvekslingen av meninger og kunnskap?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Både og. Noen har opplagt interesse av å få svar på sine utspill, selv om de er svært bastante i sin uttrykksform. Andre ser ut til å være fornøyd med å "få det ut" (sistnevnte kan minne litt om debattprogrammet "Tabloid" på TV2, der innringere får si sitt pr. SMS og telefonsvarer under rulleteksten)

**SIMON** Vet du om web-sidene til Debattcentralen eller Aftenposten er underlagt sensur i noen deler av verden?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Ikke meg bekjent.

**SIMON** Vet du om det deltagere fra andre land enn Norge i Debattcentralen? Hvis ja, har du noen idee om hvor disse kan være ifra? Holder dere en logg som viser hvor brukere logger seg inn fra?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Vi har full oversikt over hvor folk kommer fra. I tillegg til "nordmenn i Norge" har vi norske brukere fra hele verden. Dessuten åpner reglene våre for bruk av annet skandinavisk og engelsk skriftspråk. Derfor har vi også mange svenske og danske brukere, samt en del amerikanere (gjerne med norsk bakgrunn). Vi har også enkelte brukere fra Israel, som spesielt er aktive i Midtøsten-debatten.

Ad: svenske og danske brukere: Vi har fått flere tilbakemeldinger om at grunnen til at disse bruker våre sider er en generell innstramming på svenke og danske nettsted. Svenske Aftonbladet ble i 2002 dømt for å ha publisert injurier på sin nettdebatt. Etter dette valgte flere nettaviser å stenge debattsidene sine, eller å innføre et system der alle innlegg må leses gjennom av redaksjonen på forhånd. Lovverket i Norge mht. ytringsfrihet er nok mer liberalt, og derfor har vi ikke vurdert det samme.

**SIMON**

Er det mulig å lage lenker til eksterne web-sider i debatt-innlegg ? Hvorfor / hvorfor ikke?

**DEBATT-CENTRALEN**

Det er mulig å legge inn adressen til andre websider, men bare som ren tekst. Dvs. at selv om du legger inn en URL av typen "http://www.aftenposten.no..." osv. blir den ikke klikkbar - du må kopiere linken og lime den inn i adressefeltet ditt.

Det hadde vært en smal sak for oss å få til dette, men vi ønsker å begrense slik linking litt. Lenker til sider som bryter med loven, eller ellers upassende sider blir i noen tilfeller fjernet. Eks. en link som viste til videoen der den amerikanske journalisten David Pearl blir halshugget, og andre linker til lignende "srterke scener".

Det har også hendt at vi har fjernet linker til nynazistiske sider der det oppfordres til drap på folkegrupper etc.



### Interview #3 with DC moderator

- SIMON** Hender det at Aftenpostens papir-/online utgave gjengir eller viser til meninger som utkrystalliserer seg i Debattcentralen (evt rene innlegg)?
- DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Ja, det hender stadig oftere. Det hender også i stadig større grad at papirutgaven tar initiativ til debatter på våre sider, og oppsummerer svarene - evt. med utdrag. Dette er helt bevisst, og er en måte å knytte nett og papir tettere sammen på som Aftenpostens ledelse ønsker å se mer av.
- SIMON** Hvor mange registrerte brukere har Debattcentralen (dette trengs til statistiske formål)?
- DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Hvis du tenker på hvor mange som har registrert seg med epost-adresse/mobilnummer for å få mulighet til å skrive innlegg, er det registrert 15200 pr. 11/5-03. Vi har mellom 30 og 90 nye registrerte brukere pr. dag.
- SIMON** Hvor mange av disse er aktive?
- DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Alle er "aktive" i større eller mindre grad, men det varierer veldig; fra 1 innlegg i måneden til 50 - 100 innlegg pr. dag eller mer.
- SIMON** Hvor mange logger seg gjennomsnittlig på Debattcentralen per dag?
- DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Hvis du mener "logger seg på" i betydningen "skriver innlegg", ca. 6-9000 på en vanlig hverdag. Hvis du tenker på hvor mange som kikker innom for å lese, uten nødvendigvis å skrive selv, ligger tallet gjerne mellom 120.000 og 160.000 på en vanlig hverdag.
- SIMON** Har du noen formening om hvor mange som bare leser innlegg i Debattcentralen, uten å ta del i debatten (såkalte "lurkere")?
- DEBATT-CENTRALEN** Det er vanskelig å si, men jeg vil tippe mellom 100.000-150.000 unike brukere i måneden.



### **Appendix 3C: Results from online survey (CD)**

The attached CD contains all results from the online surveys, as collected through the following locations:

GUT <http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Guardian/quest-eng.html>  
SOF <http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Spiegel/quest-ger.html>  
DC <http://www.ifi.uio.no/survey/Aftenposten/quest-nor.html>

A copy of the survey forms may also be found on the attached CD.

