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Critical Reflections on the Participative Nature of Blogs

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Abstract

In this paper the often celebratory accounts of the civic, participatory, and democratic potentials of the blogosphere are being critically assessed. While these potentials are not denied or minimised, it is argued that some trends and phenomena detrimental to these potentials need to be acknowledged as well. With regard to the latter, 5 distinct threats are identified. At a structural/organisational level of analysis, the colonisation of the blogosphere by the market, the appropriation of the blogosphere by cultural and political elites and strategies of control by states and employers will be addressed. At an individual level of analysis, examples of online intimidation by fellow bloggers and so-called anti-publics using blogs and online forums to disseminate discourses of hate are considered. Many of the examples provided expose the blogosphere as situated in between the public and the private sphere, which can be problematic from a participatory perspective. Above all, it is concluded that the internet is a medium rife with contradictions and cannot be separated from the tensions and conflicts present in the offline world; it is part of it.

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To blog or not to blog. Is that the question?

Introduction

The weblog or blog is a recent and relatively popular phenomenon which is deemed to have the potential to promote citizen participation in the media, and in particular in the production of (critical) media content by netizens (Hauben, 1995). Technorati.com, which monitors the so-called blogosphere, estimates the number of blogs worldwide at present at approximately 75 million.[2] A blog may be defined as an online diary allowing the author to share her/his views on a variety of subjects directed at a potentially global, but more often local or rather micro publics. The blogosphere[3] can be deconstructed in different ways: as alternative citizen journalism, as participatory media enabling citizens and activists to produce their own content, as a social platform to communicate with friends and family, and as a vehicle for airing (alternative) viewpoints (See: Allan, 2002; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Deuze, 2005; Tremayne, 2006; Keren, 2006).

It is therefore not surprising that the blogosphere is characterised by a high degree of diversity – in format, in discourse, and in exposure. Not all blogs have a political character in the strict sense of the word, but the definition of what may be considered political also plays a vital role here. Is the political only regarded from a narrow institutional and procedural perspective, or from a broader perspective, which also includes for example sexual and gender identities, or which sees daily life as inherently political (Mouffe, 2005; de Certeau, 1988)? From this broad perspective of the political, blogs do – in many cases – politicise the private, fuelled by the politics of visibility or *'the struggles for visibility'*, which characterise the *'non-localized space of mediated publicness'* (Thompson, 1995: 247).

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[2] However, not all blogs are active.

[3] This is a explicit reference to the Habermassian notion of the public sphere (see Habermas, 1974/1989).

Contrary to websites, which are mostly static, a weblog is often regarded as a much more dynamic and interactive medium. This also explains why 'to blog' has become a verb. One common assumption in recent debates on blogging and interactive media in general, is that the traditional distinction between the public and the producers of the media content is increasingly blurring. In this regard Allan (2002: 127) describes blogging as *'personalised journalism'*, with characteristics such as first-hand eyewitness accounts, and a two-sided communicative process between the producers of content and those who consume it, whereby the consumer may also become the producer. Along the same lines, MacKinnon (2004: 10) suggests that one should speak of an *'information community'* rather than the traditional notion of 'the public'. In this regard, the idea of the *'active public' (*see Livingstone, 2003), and concepts such as *'prosumers'* (Toffler, 1980) or 'produsers' (Bruns, 2006) are relevant as well. A blog, according to famous blogger Rebecca Blood (2002)*, 'empowers individuals on many levels'*.

Apart from the fact that blogging enables a form of active citizen journalism, the blogosphere is also often regarded as a platform for debate and the dissemination of critical (counter-hegemonic) content and ideas. Kahn and Kellner (2004: 93) explicitly link blogging to counter-hegemonic projects by positioning them as potential and potent instruments of empowerment in the hands of marginalised and radical groups in society. For example, some scholars are of the opinion that the many so-called war-blogs which appeared after the most recent Gulf war, offer a valuable alternative to the mainstream reporting on that war by professional journalists, thus forming a valuable (alternative) source of news, as well as an instrument for political action. In her study of war blogs, Wall (2005: 166) comes to the conclusion that:

> *[T]here does appear to be a form of post-modern journalism here: one that challenges elite information control and questions the legitimacy of mainstream news, that consist not so much of grand narratives as small slices of stories which are seemingly endlessly reproduced.*

Blogs as interactive media are also often associated with the key concept of participation. In this regard, it is too readily stated that new media bring along revolutionary new relationships, and that these media offer citizens new opportunities to engage or participate independently and critically in the (online) public sphere. However, this should not be accepted as unequivocal or a given. First, the concept 'new' should still be interpreted from an historic perspective. Every renewal goes hand in hand with processes that reinforce power relations and hegemonies, but at the same time open-up with new

avenues for change (Feather, 1995). In this regard, Slevin (2000: 109) notes that *'[w]hile Internet use may hold out the possibility of emancipation, we must at the same time be aware of how it might create new mechanisms of suppression'*. It therefore also matters what type of participation is attributed to blogs, and in particular, how this participation manifests itself concretely in social, political and economic relations. Carpentier (2007: 88-89) convincingly argues that blogging is characterised by semi-participation: *'Their lack of focus on micro-participation – and on the reduction of power imbalances at the organisational level – renders [blog sites] different from participatory organisations (senso stricto).'* Often bloggers are individuals dependent on another (commercial) organisation to publish and blog. As such, bloggers as participants in discursive spaces often have only limited control over the content they produce and upload (see further) and embed themselves increasingly in the inherently hyper-capitalist logic of the internet.

Kahn and Kellner (2004: 93) also conclude that blogs and the internet in general form part of a 'revolution' which *'promotes and disseminates the capitalist consumer society, individualism and competition, and that has involved new modes of fetishism, enslavement, and domination yet to be clearly perceived and theorized'*. Wolf (1998: 26) also makes a similar case criticising the increased commodification and the claims that the internet is the cure to all ills of society: *'calling the Internet the Great Equalizer helps to sell more computers. The metaphor masquerades as a quick fix to social inequality while ignoring the factors that lead to inequality'*.

It is thus all too easy to regard the blog phenomenon exclusively in terms of the democratic and participatory potentials and of the emancipatory agency of the individual. As O'Neil (2005: 18) points out: *'Blogging signifies the extension of networking and linking, but also that of controlling and excluding; however the second part of the equation is not usually acknowledged in male-dominated blogspace'*. Without minimising or disregarding the democratic potentials celebrated above, one should thus also acknowledge the limitations of and constraints to these participative and democratic potentials. In this paper the focus is firmly on the 'second part of the equation', and in this regard five problematic areas can be identified:[4]

    1.   Colonisation by the market

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[4] Although the problem of the digital divide is extremely relevant in this context, we do not discuss it here. However, access to the information and communication infrastructure, and the knowledge and skills needed to deal with the media in a critical manner, and to search for and find relevant information, is a prerequisite for meaningful participation in an online context (see Norris, 2001; Cammaerts et al, 2003).

2. Appropriation by political (and cultural) elites
3. Censorship by states, organisations and industries
4. Social control by citizens
5. Anti-democratic voices

In what follows, these five limitations will be discussed more in detail, and illustrated with a couple of the recently emerging examples.

Colonisation by the market

The public sphere as described by Habermas (1974/1989) in his historic and normative analysis of the birth of liberal democracy in West-Europe is an abstraction characterised by an independent positioning versus state and market. The public sphere can thus be understood as a symbolic space where political dialogue may be conducted, unfettered by status, on the basis of rational arguments, and focussed on consensus and the common good. Villa (1992: 712) describes the public sphere as *'a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action'.* Through the growing use of the term 'blogosphere' – at least in some academic environments – the impression is created that blogs make an important contribution to the creation of a new deliberative (online) public sphere. Coleman and Gøtze, (2001: 17) claim that the internet *'makes manageable largescale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation'*. Without going too deep into the problematic character of such statements here, it ought to be clear that recent developments make it almost impossible to sustain and substantiate these[5]. Here we shall mainly focus on the so-called colonisation or re-feudalisation (to recycle one of Habermas' terms) of the blogosphere by capitalist market forces (Dahlberg, 2005).

In recent years most popular sites hosting blogs, and also social networks, have been appropriated by large media conglomerates and venture capitalists. Prime examples in this regard are Blogger.com and Blogspot.com, two of the most popular sites hosting blogs, which were taken over by Google. Google also bought the popular video-blog or vlog site YouTube. The developers of the social network site, MySpace, which has blog functions as well, in turn sold their company to Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. This illustrates above all that the dominant media agents are very keen to position themselves in the new digital landscape where 'the consumer' has also become 'the producer'. In

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[5] See: Dahlberg, 2001; Barber, 2003; Dean, 2003; Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005; Mouffe, 2005; King 2006

addition, many media industries also establish their own blog service where readers may host their blogs. A good example here is Guardian Blogs (http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/).

The growing colonisation of the blogosphere by so-called 'corporate actors' has the result that the issue of copyright and (intellectual) property is evermore present and contentious. In this regard we may refer to the work of Lessig (2004: ch 10), one of the champions of the so-called Creative Commons,[6] who argues:

> *Every realm is governed by copyright law, whereas before most creativity was not. The law now regulates the full range of creativity—commercial or not, transformative or not—with the same rules designed to regulate commercial publishers.*

This conflict manifests itself on two levels: 1) tackling the posting of copyright protected material on sites and blogs, and 2) answering the question of who owns the copyright of the content made by produsers. Both issues present different challenges, from a legal perspective, but also in terms of the consequences for creative citizens. The fact that digitalised 'products' may be copied endlessly without loss of quality, the share and peer-to-peer culture online and post-modern culture challenges the commodification efforts of content by the media industry. which, Citizens increasingly happily sample and create 'bricolages' with existing content, '*re-using existing artefacts and incorporating bits and pieces*' (Hartley, 2002: 22ff). Increasingly artists are starting to develop counter-strategies by introducing innovative distribution techniques for the content they produce. Prince and Radiohead, among many others, 'give away' their music, online or through a newspaper, thereby reaching a massive audience and making money off their concerts and merchandising rather then selling CDs. While artists receive on average between 4 to 6% of the retail price of a CD and usually loose the rights to their music (Frost, 2007), they earn a tenfold or even more from concerts and merchandising. Some argue that this might potentially lead to the empowerment of artists versus the industry (Frost, 2007), but at the same time this shift has also made going to a concert a very expensive night out, which might result in declining audiences for bands that are not of the popularity of Prince and Radiohead. The music industry, which is thrown in a deep crisis, is thus (slowly) re-configuring itself in order to adapt to the changing digital media environment, by converging the roles of management, concert promoter, publisher and label, by multiplying the number of distribution channels, including ring-tones, computer games,

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[6] http://creativecommons.org/

USB-sticks, etc. or by offering musicians their masters in return for a cut from concert and merchandising revenues (Howe, 2006).

Besides this, the issue of copyright of self-produced content published and shared within a digital environment is also conflictual in itself. A recent example of the tensions this gives rise to, was the withdrawal of his songs from MySpace by singer-songwriter and activist Billy Bragg. In doing so, Bragg voiced his protest against the rather vague and ambiguous 'terms and conditions' which MySpace asked its users to accept. On his MySpace page Bragg wrote:

> *The real problem is the fact that they can sub-license it to any company they want and keep the royalties themselves without paying the artist a penny. It also doesn't stipulate that they can use it for non-commercial use only which is what I'd want to see in that clause. The clause is basically far too open for abuse and thus I'm very wary.*[7]

MySpace amended its conditions[8] as a result of Bragg's protest, but that in itself does not solve the crux of the problem. The aim of the business-model of almost all so-called Web-2.0 applications is to create a financial surplus value by means of the 'user-generated content' produced for free by individuals. As Kim and Hamilton (2006: 555) conclude in their critical analysis of OhmyNews, a South-Korean blog-site promoting citizen journalism, they implement *'an organizational model that broadens the demographics of who can participate, but it also monitors the nature of those contributions while minimizing its own labour costs to its economic benefit.'*

Furthermore, Deuze (2007) draws our attention to a number of additional problematic phenomena that undermine the blogosphere as a critical 'free' democratic public sphere due to its colonisation by the market. He refers to the so-called 'clogs', or corporate blogs, which are becoming more popular by the day. Clogs are in essence extensions of the marketing and PR communications strategies of organisations.

Besides this, Deuze also mentions so-called 'blogolas' and 'flogs', which are in many ways much more problematic. 'Blogola' refers to the payola-practices in the music industry, whereby DJ's and radio stations are paid to play specific music very often, and in addition making positive comments about it. This same practice is becoming very

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[7] See: http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/06/08/blly_bragg_myspace/
[8] See here the most recent version of the terms and conditions of MySpace: http://collect.myspace.com/misc/terms.html?z=1

common in the unregulated blogosphere[9]. In the United States television stations shower bloggers with free promotion material, and some even go as far as to offer certain (popular) bloggers pleasure trips for promoting specific programmes (Barnes, 2007). One recent example is a trip that Warner Bros organised for 7 bloggers in the framework of their PR-campaign to launch a new series. Another example was the casting of a blogger in the comedy series Scrubs, produced by ABC.

A 'flog' then is a fake blog, or a blog that goes even further than a clog, and could actually be seen as part of a manipulative PR strategy of a company (or industry). Deuze (2007) mentions the 'Wal-Marting Across America' blog,[10] which in 2006 reported on the trip through the U.S. by two people, apparently Wal-Mart fans, going from Wal-Mart to Wal-Mart. On closer inspection it transpired that the two 'fans' were a freelance journalist and a professional photographer employed by the Washington Post and sponsored by Wal-Mart. It also became apparent that the entire campaign was set up by the PR-firm, Edelman.

Even though the internet emerged in collaboration between governmental (military) as well as academic actors, and that it was initially based on strict non-profit philosophy, its recent history has shown that market forces have established themselves as the hegemonic paradigm of the internet. This does not imply, however, that those advocating the not-for-profit ideals of the early internet are entirely absent, on the contrary. The creative commons initiative, open source developments, freeware, free online academic content, the communication rights campaigns are all manifestations of this (Walch, 2002; Lessig 2004; Padovani, 2004). Having said this, the other side of the coin is that the political economy of the new media industry is characterised ever more by an increasing commodification of content, and by concentration trends leading to the creation of oligopolies, both within certain existing niches or across niches (Mansell, 2004; Murdoch and Golding, 2005).

We can speak of a constant and highly conflictual dialectic between the capitalist paradigm and the communitarian free access paradigm, which will never be entirely resolved. And this is precisely why this conflictual dialectic produces a permanent development and deployment of new strategies by all actors, but to reach conflicting aims.

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[9] TV and radio in the U.S. are regulated to prevent the old-time practices of payola.
[10] See URL: http://walmartingacrossamerica.com/ en http://edelman.com/

Appropriation by political (and cultural) elites

Increasingly political and cultural elites have their own weblogs. Such a blog holds many advantages for these elites in respect of self-marketing, PR and propaganda strategies. In addition, two mutually reinforcing factors should be taken into account. First, a blog allows elites to disseminate their ideas (and 'cultural products') independent from the mainstream media, for it allows them (or their spokespersons) to communicate with their fans, supporters, sympathisers or even opponents without intermediaries, and without running the risk that a journalist could 'twist' their words. Second, just by being elites, their blogs are automatically read more often than those of 'ordinary' bloggers. Mainstream journalists are also part of the audience of elite blogs and from time to time mainstream media does publish a titbit about an elite or a link, thus giving the elite blog and also the politician or pop-star even more publicity and exposure.

Two dialectical strategies explain why cultural, political and economic elites use blogs ever more frequently. On the one hand there is a pull-movement, whereby fans, sympathisers, etc., are drawn to the blog of their (political and/or cultural) idol. On the other hand, as they are famous, a push-movement reinforces messages, music and other content posted on the blog, through the mainstream media as well as through hyperlinks on other blogs (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). The focus here will be on examples of the use of blogs by political elites.

In terms of blog-use by political elites, the U.S. was – as is traditional in modern campaigning – a trendsetter. Howard Dean, an ex-governor of Vermont, was the first American politician who very cleverly and strategically used blogs and websites in his campaign for nomination as democratic presidential candidate in 2004[11]. By appropriating a strategic model developed by the social movement MoveOn.org, Dean managed to create a campaign dynamic that unexpectedly put him in a position to challenge Al Gore. The MoveOn strategy consisted of an interactive model of online communication and linking this to fund-raising and offline gatherings (Jacobs, 2005). The presidential campaign of 2004 demonstrated for the first time that the internet could not only be used as an instrument for dissemination of information – independently from mainstream media, but that it could also be extremely valuable as an organisational instrument linking up activists and sympathisers (Vaccari, 2006). It stands to reason that this example is followed keenly by all candidates in the 2008 US presidential election

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[11] See: http://www.deanforamerica.com/, which was later changed to http://www.democracyforamerica.com

campaign. For example, Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for the democratic nomination on her website first. Just as almost all other candidates, her biggest rival, Barack Obama, not only has his own website and different blog sites, but also a MySpace page, a Facebook page, a YouTube profile and a profile on the micro blogsite, Twitter[12]. This latest Web-2.0 application allows users to send short instant-messages of less than 140 characters to all 'friends'. These messages are not only disseminated online, but also via mobile networks, which could be relevant with a view to mobilisation.

Another phenomenon, which is similar to the blogola practices of the media industry, is to involve 'famous' (political) bloggers in campaigns by granting them an accreditation to follow the campaign, or by making them simply co-workers in the campaign. The campaign to be nominated as the Democrat candidate for the senate in 2006 between Connecticut senator Joe Lieberman (Al Gore's former running-mate against Bush Jr. in 2000) and Ned Lamont, was marked by a political cyber war against Lieberman. In the campaign Joe Lieberman was not only sharply criticised locally, but also nationally for his open support of the war in Iraq. The aggressive online anti-Lieberman campaign was largely based on the use of bloggers and anti-war activists, to place Lieberman in a bad light[13]. When Lamont was nominated in 2006 as the candidate for the Democratic Party, Lieberman decided to stand as an independent candidate. Eventually Lieberman was re-elected as an independent candidate as senator for Connecticut, which clearly indicates that we should not overestimate the impact of the internet or blogs on politics. In France blogs are also increasingly used in political campaigns. During the recent presidential elections, Sarkozy[14] appointed Loic Le Meur, one of the most popular political bloggers in France, as his personal adviser on the use of blogs, YouTube and even Second Life in his campaign strategy (BBC Online, 2007c).

These examples not only illustrate the symbolic power of blogs, but also that blogs are increasingly being used, as a cunning political (marketing and propaganda) instrument in the hands of political elites to communicate with citizens in an attempt to by-pass the mediation of media-professionals, to reach a younger generation, to recruit sympathisers and to generate funds. Moreover, a politician with a blog, seen to be chatting with the citizen, and present on the popular community network sites, shows that s/he is web

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[12] website: http://barackobama.com/; blog-sites: http://www.runobama.com/blog/, http://www.barack-obama-now.com/blog/; MySpace: http://www.myspace.com/barackobama; FaceBook: http://www.facebook.com/person.php?id=2355496748; YouTube: http://youtube.com/barackobama en http://twitter.com/
[13] For more on this, see the documentary Blog Wars by James Rogan
[14] See: http://loiclemeur.com/, http://www.sarkozy.fr/home/ and http://www.supportersdesarkozy.com/home

savvy and 'with-it'. Even though their contributions are mostly written by a copywriter or close aid, the image of a politician is boosted by this and in these times of image sculpting, the post-modern politicians must leave their traces in as many public places and spaces as possible. The same goes for the cultural elites, such as pop stars, actors and other protagonists of the present day celeb-culture.

Censorship and intimidation by states and employers

Almost instinctively one links the idea of censorship with questionable practices of authoritarian regimes who have a keen interest in curtailing the freedom of expression of their citizens, something which is highly pertinent when it comes to blogging. However, in (Western) democratic countries, organisations such as universities or industries are also not completely innocent when it comes to censorship, encouraging self-censorship, or in some cases even dismissal of employees because of what they write on their blogs.

However, before addressing the employers, the strategies being adopted by (some) states to control the blogosphere will be discussed briefly. According to a recent report of the OpenNet Initiative (ONI), approximately 25 states are actively filtering the internet access of their citizens: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Burma/Myanmar, China, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, UAE, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen (see BBC Online, 2007b). These countries, as well as others which do not filter internet access but do act in a repressive manner, see the internet and the free flow of ideas which it enables, as a dangerous threat to the social and political status quo and 'stability', be it defined as national security, promoting religious harmony, or to protect some elusive homogenous identity. For one or more of these reasons some states are not happy with individual bloggers claiming their right to freedom of expression by airing their views on the political and everyday matters, which in a repressive context become highly political. The Muslim world, Asia and especially China, are most active in surveilling, censoring, and ferreting out political dissident debates on the internet. This also shows that the so-called anonymity and potential to circumvent state control offered by the internet, is mostly overrated.

A recent example of repression of bloggers is the arrest and conviction to three years' imprisonment of the Egyptian activist, Abdel Kareem Soliman, in February 2007. Soliman called Egyptian President Moebarak a dictator, and accused the Islamic university, al-Azhar, of being the breeding-ground for terrorists, and also of repressing critical voices. It

was generally accepted that Soliman's conviction would act as deterrent for other Egyptian bloggers. However, his conviction led to a campaign of solidarity which resounded not only in Egypt but also internationally (see BBC Online, 2007a). In Iran blogging has also become extremely popular in recent years, and bloggers are regularly intimidated and censored by the Iranian government. In his study on state intervention Khiabany (2007: 25) says:

> [T]he claim over the imminent entering of the world into a distinctly new epoch where time, space, political authority, economies of scale and social relations will become irrelevant is not grounded in reality. It also illustrates that similar claims about the impact of the Internet for prosperity and democracy for developing countries is a myth, something which many under the banner of More Speed More Progress try to reinforce.

As already indicated above, not only states keep watch, intimidate and even repress people for what they post online. Employers also at times react in a repressive way when confronted with the 'freely expressed' views that employees express online. Because blogs position themselves right in the middle of an ever-growing grey zone between the private and the public, some employers regard the deepest stirrings and musings of employees as a threat to the organisation's image, be they for-profit or not-for-profit.

In July 2007 a case was reported whereby visual information from Facebook profiles was used as evidence in disciplinary cases against Oxford students who had 'misbehaved' in the post-exam celebrations. In a statement the Oxford University Student Union wrote to their members: *'It has been brought to the attention of the Student Union that the proctors have been using evidence gathered from Facebook for disciplinary matters'.* The Student Union furthermore advised their members *'to alter your privacy settings on Facebook to prohibit members of staff and faculty from viewing your profile and photographs'* (BBC Online, 2007d). This shows the blurring of what is considered to be private and public, and the contentious nature of privacy in a post-web 2.0 world.

Businesses are also becoming more active with regard to the surveillance of the online activities of their employees; it often already starts at the recruiting stage. A survey done amongst 800 HR managers by the social software site Viadeo, brought to light that one fifth of the respondents used the internet to obtain personal information about potential candidates, amounting generally to googling these persons. In addition 25 percent of these managers admitted that they did not appoint a candidate on the grounds of

information obtained online (Cheng, 2007). It could be claimed that because of the popularity of the phenomenon blogging, and the even greater popularity, especially amongst teenagers and young adults, of social software sites such as MySpace and Facebook, we are increasingly leaving behind an 'internet footprint' in online caches and archives. This shows again that the issue of privacy and protection of online identities are increasingly becoming a pressing issue. Facebook's privacy policy squarely places responsibility for privacy protection with the user. While Facebook has in the mean time been opened-up to search engines like Google, Facebook (2007) states that they *'understand [we] may not want everyone in the world to have the information [we] share on Facebook'* and this is why Facebook gives the user *'control of [their] information'*.

The blogging activity itself can also become a dangerous activity, when found out by employers, especially if the content being posted is critical of their work or their employer in their blogs. Often blogging is a way of getting support from an offline community, handling stress, putting the boss in his or her place, demystifying myths, or laughing at the mundane and routine life of an employee. Ringmar (2007: 94) says: *'You blog to stay sane. You blog to stay human'*. But employers often see this quite differently, and regard it as a threat to the carefully constructed image of their business or organisation. *'How the bosses react to such insubordination is easy to imagine. They get upset, they get mad, they reach for the corporate rulebook.'* Ringmar (2007: 94) concludes. Ringmar, a former lecturer at the LSE, caused himself havoc by voicing his extremely critical and cynical views on his colleagues and department in his personal blog 'Forget the Footnotes'[15]. When his superiors became aware of his blog and its content Ringmar was requested to stop blogging and remove the content of his blog from the internet. He refused to comply with these requests, invoking his freedom of speech and his academic freedom to write what he wants where he wants (Macleod, 2006). Because of the almost holy character of academic freedom within academia, there was little that the academic authorities could do to him, other than slander his character, which is described in detail in his recent e-book (Ringmar, 2007).

There are, however, numerous other instances where employees were dismissed because of their blogs or what they posted there. One of the first examples was Heather Armstrong who was dismissed by her employer, paradoxically enough a dot.com business, because of the criticism towards her colleagues and employer on her blog Dooce.com (see BBC Online, 2005). The name of her site also became a neologism; 'being dooced' – meaning being dismissed on the grounds of your online activities.

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[15] See: http://ringmar.net/forgethefootnotes/

Catherine Sanderson (2008) is another striking example: in working hours she was the perfect bilingual secretary, who became *La Petite Anglaise* in her leisure-time, writing about her expatriate life as single mother in Paris, and sometimes also about her work for a British firm with a sense for the humorous and ironic. However, when her employer got to know about her blog, she was dismissed on the spot, even though her employer's name or her real identity was never mentioned in the blog. In March 2007 Sanderson won the court case in France which she brought against her employer, who was subsequently instructed to pay her legal fees as well as one year's salary.

There are more similar examples of employees being 'dooced' (see Ringmar, 2007: 103). These, as well as other cases in this paper, illustrate how the weblog has become a space *'neither private nor public, but more exactly private and public at the same time'* (Bauman, 1999: 3). Even though a diary has a very personal and private connotation, placing it online can at the same time also be seen as a way of 'begging' for attention and for recognition from an interested and interactive (micro) public. However, in this case, the collapsing of the private and the public does not lead to emergence of new collective freedoms as Bauman foresaw, but opens-up the possibility of more control and restrictive practices by the part of some employers and states.

Social control and online intimidation

It is, however, not merely the market, governments or private organisations that intervene to limit the democratic and participative potential of the blogosphere. Fellow bloggers or visitors to the blog can also potentially intimidate a blogger, and even shut him or her down. In this regard the phenomenon of 'flame wars' in online forums play a significant role (Eum, 2005; Cammaerts, 2005: 70; Lee, 2005: 53). Flaming – or the *'intentional (whether successful or unsuccessful) negative violations of (negotiated, evolving, and situated) interactional norms'* (O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003: 84-) – occurs when participants to an online forum are humiliated or insulted by other participants to the extent that the row turns into a mud-slinging contest, or debate completely stops as other participants withdraw.

In the blogosphere a similar phenomenon can take place, but because the blog, more so than for example an online forum, is situated on the divide between the public and the private, such attacks are often experienced as far more personal and threatening. Ringmar (2007: 55) notes, *'[y]ou cannot think and write freely as long as you are afraid of intimidations.'* In his research Kim (2007) describes two interesting cases in this

regard. In doing so he invokes Noelle-Neuman's (1984) so-called spiral of silence,[16] which according to him, amounts to a spiral of invisibility in an online context. Kim gives a voice to two South-Korean bloggers – Sophie and Joyride – both victims of online intimidation campaigns by fellow bloggers. Sophie, a Korean immigrant, mother of two children, living in New York, writes a blog about paintings, immigration, education, and (male) sexuality on the popular South-Korean blog site OhmyNews. In her blog Sophie is very open and also critical of the Korean, and especially male Korean, identity. This was clearly not appreciated by a (nationalistic, male and anti-American) part of the South Korean blog community. As a result she started receiving more and more snide and insulting comments from other bloggers but also from anonymous readers of her blog, causing her sleepless nights, and eventually even making her stop blogging for a while. Sophia then switched to another (non-Korean) blog service in order to avoid the gaze and critiques of fellow Koreans.

Joyride is the second blogger discussed by Kim (2007). Joyride has a popular blog, and is also a cartoonist. In his postings and cartoons he criticised the narrow-minded South-Korean nationalism, and the deep-seated racism in South-Korea against Japan and the Japanese. His tolerance and openness toward Japanese culture elicited many controversial and negative comments. Because of the personal threats in his e-mail, and the insults directed at his wife, Joyride eventually decided to remove the interactive function on his blog making it impossible for visitors to add comments. After a month he reinstated this function (giving as reason the fact that he missed the positive feedback), but he no longer replied to postings, and the tone of his postings and cartoons also became distinctly milder.

Kim's study, as well as other studies, again indicates that there is an inherent contradiction in the dynamics between the private and the public. On the one hand visibility is essential, and is actively sought in order to promote the popularity of the blog, but on the other hand this visibility and popularity also leads to an increase possibility of social control and intimidation. In this context social control can be seen both in the Foucauldian panoptic sense – the few watching the many – an in a synoptic sense – the many watching the few. Both are closely linked, and promote each other, as Lyon (2006: 47) also puts forward.

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[16] The spiral of silence explains why someone who holds a dissident view on something, often decides not to speak out rather than air these views in public, for fear of being isolated.

Anti-Publics[17]

The critical tradition within social sciences often tends to focus too exclusively on progressive movements. However, it cannot be ignored that there are many anti-publics active in a democracy, certainly online, which openly question deeply rooted democratic values and often flirt with the limits of freedom of expression. Contrary to the US, where freedom of expression is almost absolute and constitutionally protected by the First Amendment, European countries have adopted a more ethically inspired delineation between what is protected by the freedom of expression and what is not. For example, parliaments in many European countries (but also beyond) have all voted legislation that not only considers incitement of violence, but also of discrimination or racial hatred as unacceptable within a democracy. The European tradition is thus one that, as Butler (1997: 72) expresses, does not deny 'the action that the speech performs', and takes the view that, in the case of incitement of violence or racism and in the case of negationism, no clear distinction can be made between ideas and actions.

A pertinent example of how controversial this debate is, are the extreme-right blogs and online forums, and the hurtful discourses being produced there. In Belgium the website Cyberhate.be of the Center for Equal Opportunities and the Fight against Racism (CGKR) receives on average about 30 complaints per month, falling roughly within the following three categories:

      1) racism on discussion forums and chat sites (sites with no racist tone)

      2) racist websites (such as Stormfront, but also for example Blood & Honour)

      3) racist chain letters or PowerPoint presentations

                        (Sofie D'Huster, e-mail interview, 21/05/2007).

Extreme-right movements and activists, as well as individual bloggers, increasingly (ab)use the right to freedom of expression as the ultimate argument to claim their 'democratic' right to be a racist.

In spring of 2006 this phenomenon was boldly demonstrated by the hateful discourses produced by bloggers and on online forums in the aftermath of the murder of Joe Van Holsbeke in Brussels' central station (12/04), and the involuntary manslaughter of Guido Demoor on Bus 23 in Antwerp (24/06). With reference to the murder of Joe Van Holsbeke, Paul Belien, a Vlaams Belang ideologist, posted a text with the title 'Geef ons Wapens' ('Give us Weapons'), in which he compares the (then still presumed) Moroccan

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[17] This is partially based on Cammaerts, 2007

perpetrators with predators who are taught to kill during the sacrificial feast, and are not afraid of blood. From here he calls for the taking up of arms by the 'own nation'. After the violence in Bus 23, which was to be fatal for Guido de Moor, Luc Van Balberghe, an extreme-right journalist and publisher, posted the following on his blog, 'Vrij van Zegel':

> *In Antwerp every respectable Caucasian is bursting with (as yet) suppressed anger. Anger at the venom who think that the city belongs to them. Anger at the utter helplessness, because every person in his right mind has to hold his tongue in cheek and meekly bow before the foreign leeches.* (http://www.vrijvanzegel.net/, 27/06/2006 – own translation)

In both instances the CGKR filed official complaints. Belien removed his posting, and Van Balgerghe amended his considerably. He replaced the words 'ongedierte' ('venom') and 'bloedzuigers' ('leeches') with 'jongeren' ('youths'), and also removed a controversial allegory about ants needing to be exterminated with DDT.

As the categories of complaints received by Cyberhate.be already indicated, online forums also pose particular problems. US based sites such as Stormfront and Blood&Honour all have sub-sites in different languages, allowing European extreme-right and fascist activists to voice racist language or distribute content relating to Holocaust denial in their own language. Much of what is being posted on these sites is in stricto senso prohibited by the Belgian anti-racist and anti-discrimination legislation (1981/2003), as well as by the law that prohibits negationism (1995).

A very distasteful example are the extremely racist and wounding discourses posted on the Stormfront site after the murder in Antwerp's inner city by an extreme-right youngster of the Nigerian au-pair Oulematou Niangadou and Luna Drowart, the baby she was minding, in May 2006. Here follows some examples in translation (please accept my apology for the offensive content) of reactions on the Dutch-speaking part of Stormfont:

> *Pfff, this does not keep me awake. I just cannot understand why he also shot the white child.* (Watch Out, 11/05/2006 – own translation)

> *You shot a negro woman, why did you then shoot the baby? While there are enough other blacks in the neighbourhood?* (NSDA-pe, 12/05/2006 – own translation)

He could at least have taken a few other Jews with him. Antwerp stinks of Jews.
(Hidrich, Posting on Stormfront, 13/05/2006 – own translation)

Every right and left-minded citizen cannot but react emotionally when confronted with such wounding words (Matsuda, et al, 1993). However, the internet makes it possible for netizens living in Belgium to claim (certain) rights in the US. The physical location where the site is hosted, determines which legislation applies. Sofie D'Hulster of the CGKR confirms this:

Sites such as Stormfront and Blood&Honour are based in the US where the right to freedom of expression is absolute, protected by their constitution. Thus there is no legal procedure in place to silence these website. Even though the website is accessible in different languages, among them also Dutch and French, we are unable to do anything in terms of Belgian legislation. In addition, in this case it amounts to nothing to complain to their internet provider (which sometimes does help), as they own the server and the telecommunications link (the cable) to the rest of the internet world. (E-mail interview, 21/05/2007 – own translation)

This raises many questions for which there are no easy answers. Questions such as: Does it make sense to ban such anti-publics form the public sphere? European governments could easily decide to install a filter system, blocking access from Europe to sites such as Stormfront, but the real question is whether this serves any purpose? First, as the list of countries that filter the internet showed, that is not particularly a club you would want to belong to as a democratic country. Furthermore, who will then decide which sites to block, and what guarantees are there to prevent that other radical and alternative voices in society can be censored also in future? On the other hand it is clear that a democracy and democratic values of equality, solidarity and respect for others' views, should, and can, defend themselves against anti-democratic forces aimed at destroying the democracy from within (see Popper 1965: 265). Mouffe (2005: 120), an advocate of a radical and conflictual pluralism of ideas and movements in society, states that *'[a] democracy cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries.'* However, the question remains whether online censorship is the right strategy to combat this? Butler (1997) seems to disagree and warns us that the removal of certain discourses and idea's from the public space does not mean that these ideas have disappeared.

Conclusion

This overview conveys foremost that the image of the blogosphere as a model for an online public sphere where every person is free to air his or her view, thus making rational dialogue between equal participants in public debate possible, is deeply flawed. Different actors are engaged to minimise or erode the democratic and participatory potential of the blogosphere. In this overview five phenomena which undermine the participatory character of the internet and blogs were identified. Three of these can be situated at the structural level: the tensions which the commodification of the internet and the blogosphere bring about, the appropriation of the blogosphere by elites as a marketing instrument and censorship of blogs and intimidation of bloggers by states and employers. A further two are mostly situated at the level of the individual or citizen: online intimidation by fellow bloggers, and the existence of anti-publics, abusing the freedom of expression with the aim to weaken democracy and democratic values. All these phenomena demonstrate that the online environment cannot be conceptualised as an isolated sphere where social, economic and political tensions, conflicts and interests that exist in the offline world, do not apply (Robins, 1995; Saco, 2002). In this regard, O'Neil (2005: 4) asks a provocative, but relevant question: *'if social networks have migrated online, is it not logical to assume that the processes of differentiation, hierarchisation and control which, by all accounts, structure offline human interactions, have also done so?'* The overview in this paper seems to suggest the answer to this question is yes.

Because of this, the internet is a medium rife with contradictions, just as is the case in the 'real' world. While the internet is one of the drivers of the present hyper-capitalist economic system, it also makes resistance possible, as is demonstrated by among others Indymedia. But Indymedia cannot distance itself (completely) from the capitalist logic of the internet, as it needs a stable financial structure and funds to maintain its servers and buy bandwidth so that citizen journalists can upload and download alternative content. The colonisation of the internet and the blogosphere by the market is a given that cannot be denied, and this is demonstrated on different levels. Big media corporations, following a strategy of concentration and consolidation in the media industry, buy popular sites that host blogs. The corporate sector is also becoming more active in the blogosphere by involving blogs in their marketing and PR strategies. Likewise, cultural and in particular political elites have discovered the power of the blog, and are becoming ever more adept in involving blogs and social network sites in their own (political) marketing and PR strategies.

Another noticeable contradiction is the ever more porous and fluid boundaries between what is considered to be private and public. The internet is often described as the technology of convergence, and with this is usually meant the convergence of text, image and sound media. However, convergence also occurs at the level of types of communication, characterised before as one-to-one (the telephone), one-to-many (television or radio), and recently also many-to-many (peer-to-peer application or Wikis). The internet brings all these types of communication together. From this follows that communication which was initially intended as private or directed at a limited social network, can now suddenly become extremely public. As such, many blogs and social network sites are situated in the twilight zone between the private and the public, and users make themselves vulnerable in terms of repressive states, as well as their present and future employers. At the same time, some bloggers purposely attempt to maximise their publicity, thereby placing themselves openly in the public sphere, which brings to the fore the problematic nature of the dichotomy between alternative and mainstream media (see Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2007). As the research by Kim shows, this tension between public and private can also produce self-censorship or self-restraint as we become more and more aware that anything we post or publish online can at one point potentially be used against us and is publicly visible. This could result in citizens becoming more aware of the complexities of what constitutes private and public, of our back and front stage behaviour and expressions to use Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor (1959: 23).

It is, however, not only capitalism, states, employers or elites that erode the participative and democratic potentials of the internet. Two examples of disruptive online tactics by citizens were also provided: online intimidation by fellow bloggers, and the use of offensive language by anti-publics. In relation to the former victims of intimidation campaigns may stop talking altogether, de-activate the interactive function of their blogs, or start practicing self-censorship. In the second instance, whole groups in society may be insulted, and as a result racist discourses may become normalised in society.

The purpose of this overview was to tone down the often-celebratory enthusiasm displayed by many authors about the democratic potential of the internet and the blogosphere. However, this does not imply that the potential for this does not exist, just that there are also actors and phenomena at work that attempt to stifle or limit these potentialities. At the same time, it remains important to reiterate that the internet cannot be treated as being a separate entity from the economic, political and cultural realities of the offline world; it increasingly forms an integral part thereof. The internet, therefore, is

not exempt from the stresses, contradictions and conflicts so characteristic of the offline world. As Giroux (2007: 27) points out: *'Arguments suggesting that media technologies such as the Internet constitute a new democratic public sphere are vastly premature; yet, the new electronic media have not entirely faulted on their potential'.*

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