

Unstable (Counter)Publics

Online Platforms as Hybrid Forums for Socio-Political Debates

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I. A Civic Awakening in the Virtual Shopping Mall?

In April of 2009, Mark Zuckerberg reached out to the (then) 450 million users of Facebook with a video message. Striking a rather statesmanlike pose, the young CEO urged his audience to participate in a vote to determine the code of conduct that should govern the website. Facebook had previously translated its “Statement of Rights and Responsibilities” into numerous languages and posted it on its governance page for the sake of discussion.¹ As Zuckerberg was openly proud to note, the world’s largest social organization now had the opportunity to comment on the rules crafted by the company. Presumably, the company took these comments into account when redrafting its regulations, and now it was asking its users to decide which changes should be adopted in the binding version. Later, the adopted changes to the terms of use were announced on Facebook’s governance page and users were asked yet again to provide commentary and recommendations.² To the attentive user it is not entirely clear how the voting process actually worked and how the integrity of the results could be assured. It was also unclear to what extent the company would be obliged to carry out the users’ decisions. More interesting, however, is Facebook’s effort to establish a sort of legitimate sovereignty. In this situation, the CEO of the company is presented as a quasi-president, but the laws of the land are ultimately to be determined by the extensive involvement of users in the decision-making process. It has not always been the case that Facebook seemed so eager to convince its customers about the legitimacy of its terms of use. Novel, too, is its trend of using the participation of its users to establish a platform-wide form of legitimate sovereignty. This was possibly a response to criticism – voiced by users, politicians, and data-protection agencies – concerning its rather loose handling of private information. Or was it perhaps the realization that the popular online platform was in fact not a shopping mall whose visitors have to check their civil rights at the door before abandoning themselves to the pleasures of casual shopping?

As so-called “social media” have gained more and more significance, the providers of such platforms have developed something that, in Foucault’s terms, could be called an “art of government.”³ This has not only involved the imitation of certain symbols and activities that are

1 Facebook’s page devoted to “site governance” can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/fbsitegovernance> (accessed on July 31, 2014).

2 The updates posted on Facebook’s governance page are of the following sort: “We’ve proposed updates to our Privacy Policy and Statement of Rights and Responsibilities. We encourage you to read through the proposed documents and offer your comments on the ‘Discussions’ tab of this page by 12:00am PDT on April 3, 2010” (<http://www.facebook.com/fbsitegovernance>).

3 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007), esp. 87–114.

generally associated with the legitimate exercise of power; it has also involved the development and implementation of techniques with which mass numbers of users can control and manage themselves. The graphical interfaces of popular web applications, moreover, implicitly serve to control the activity of users while, behind the scenes, such activity is automatically collected, assessed, and (when necessary) removed in response to the feedback of other users. So it was that Zuckerberg appeared, as statesmanlike as possible in a video resembling a televised address by an elected official, to call his users to vote on the Facebook “Statement of Rights and Responsibilities.” This appearance was merely a symbolic gesture to emphasize a notion of participation, not to invoke real democratic decision processes.

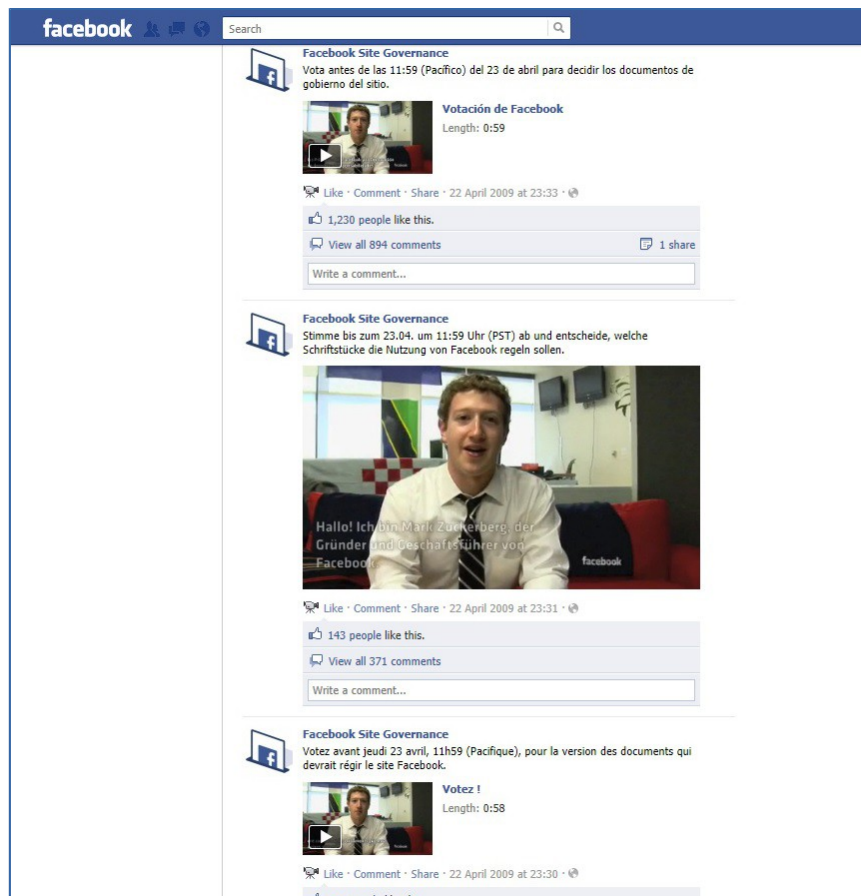


FIGURE 1: Mark Zuckerberg implores Facebook users to vote. (A screenshot of Facebook’s Governance Page)

In light of this background, my goal here is to focus on the political quality of social media. In particular I would like to explore how “platform policies” are used to construct legitimacy and how “platform designs” are used to govern the behavior of their users. This form of management is associated with the politicization of users, who demand civil rights and cultural freedom from such platforms and also rely on them to hold societal debates and to run political campaigns. As Stefan Münker has observed, “social media” have thus developed into “public

spaces.”⁴ My concentration below will be on the potential exhibited by these efforts toward politicization.

II. Platforms for Commerce and Criticism

It must be kept in mind that the original intent of these platforms was to find, in one way or another, commercial applications for their users’ activity. Whereas the media industry of the twentieth century still created content and made it available alongside advertisements, the aspiring media industry of the twenty-first century offers platforms on which users can create their own content independently. The contributions of individuals have come to take the place of professionally developed media content. Efforts to make profits are now focused on individualized advertising, licensing content to third parties, and evaluating user data.

The technical design of platforms is oriented toward these ends and is thus chiefly concerned with user interfaces and software applications. This is clear to see, for instance, in Facebook’s “like button,” which quite intentionally has no counterpart in the form of a “dislike button.” In this case, the Facebook design presents users with fewer options than did the Roman circus, where the plebs could at least respond negatively with their thumbs down.⁵ For their part, comment sections seem to be designed explicitly to prevent long debates; rather, they lend themselves to ephemeral expressions of mutual recognition or to offering positive feedback to posted content with a quick click of the “like button.” Other elements of Facebook’s design prevent users from posting hyperlinks to BitTorrent files. For some time it was even impossible to post “Bit.ly links,” which are automatically shortened hyperlinks, because Facebook feared that these could link to sources that might violate copyright provisions or might be regarded as SPAM.⁶ YouTube has likewise implemented several design elements that are meant to protect the company from potential lawsuits concerned with copyright infringement. Videos posted by users are automatically run through a database in order to see whether they contain any unauthorized music. A similar process is used to prevent people from reposting videos that YouTube has already removed. Yet another filter serves to prevent swear words and discriminatory language from appearing in the comment sections.⁷ Any user, moreover, is able to mark a given video as being “offensive” simply by clicking on the so-called “flag button.” Videos flagged in such a way are then evaluated by an editor and, when necessary, removed

⁴ See Stefan Münker, *Emergenz digitaler Öffentlichkeiten: Die sozialen Medien im Web 2.0* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009).

⁵ Facebook has entertained the idea of introducing a “want button.” Similar to the “like button,” this would allow users to make knee-jerk positive assessments (in this case to express their desire to own something) and thus it would fit seamlessly into Facebook’s commercial logic. See Laura Stampler, “Here’s What Facebook’s New ‘Want’ Button Will Look Like,” *Business Insider* (October 9, 2012), <http://www.businessinsider.com/what-facebooks-want-button-will-look-like-2012-10> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

⁶ Ben Parr, “Facebook Breaks All Bit.ly Links, Marks Them as Abusive,” *Mashable.com* (July 16, 2010), <http://mashable.com/2010/07/16/facebook-bitly-broken/> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

⁷ Matthew Moore, “YouTube’s Worst Comments Blocked by Filter,” *The Telegraph* (September 2, 2008), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/2668997/YouTubes-worst-comments-blocked-by-filter.html> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

from the site. YouTube's "flag button" corresponds to a button on Facebook labeled "report." If someone uses this button to file a report about offensive content, the material in question is then reviewed by a content moderator to see whether it might violate Facebook's "community standards." If so, it is removed.⁸ Most discussions of "social media" have overlooked the extent to which user-generated content is controlled, evaluated, and moderated.⁹ Recently, however, the popular blog *Gawker* devoted some attention to the dubious guidelines behind Facebook's content moderation.¹⁰ In only a few cases has the daily censorship that takes place on these platforms been brought to the public's attention. Some attention, for instance, has been given to a cover of *Zeit Magazin* that Facebook censored, to the company's removal of a campaign advertisement posted by the Dutch GreenLeft party, and to the general censorship of art.¹¹ Perhaps in retaliation, *Die Zeit* has recently published a story about acts of censorship committed by Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Google.¹²

The terms of use implemented by such platforms as well as their technical designs serve to regulate user activity in rather heavy-handed manner. So-called "user-generated content" is therefore always the result of a hybrid evaluation process and is thus subjected quite extensively to the controls and regulations instituted by the companies in questions. On one hand, it is in the interest of the providers to offer advertiser-friendly platforms whose orientation toward consensus fosters a form of consumer-friendliness. On the other hand, platform providers are ever in fear of being held responsible for any copyright violations that might be committed by their users.

Above all, companies have implemented strict terms of use to protect or distance themselves from potential lawsuits. The network Xbox Live, for instance, has the following language in its "End User License Agreement":

We may change the Service or delete or discontinue features, games, or other content at any and for any reason (or no reason). We may cancel or suspend your Service at any time. Our cancellation or suspension may be without cause and without notice. Upon Service cancellation, your right to use the Service stops right away.¹³

⁸ For Facebook's own description of this process, see its page titled "What Happens After You Click 'Report'": <https://www.facebook.com/notes/432670926753695/> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

⁹ In a highly informative article in *The New York Times*, Brad Stone reported about the work of companies such as Caleris, which are contracted by large web platforms to control user-generated media content. See Brad Stone, "Policing the Web's Lurid Precincts," *The New York Times* (July 18, 2010), http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/19/technology/19screen.html?_r=0 (accessed on August 5, 2014).

¹⁰ Adrian Chen, "Inside Facebook's Outsourced Anti-Porn and Gore Brigade, Where Camel Toes Are More Offensive than Crushed Heads," *Gawker.com* (February 16, 2012), <http://gawker.com/5885714/inside-facebooks-outsourced-anti-porn-and-gore-brigade-where-camel-toes-are-more-offensive-than-crushed-heads> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

¹¹ See the blog post "Facebook löscht Penis Cover," *Futurzone.at* (July 28, 2012), <http://futurezone.at/digital-life/facebook-loescht-penis-cover/24.583.678>; and Bas Paternotte, "Facebook verwijdert iconische PSP poster," *HP/De Tijd* (August 23, 2012), <http://www.hpdetijd.nl/2012-08-23/facebook-verwijdert-iconische-psp-poster/> (both websites were accessed on August 5, 2014).

¹² Götz Hamann and Marcus Rohwetter, "Vier Sheriffs zensieren die Welt: Wie Apple, Facebook, Amazon und Google dem Internet ihre Gesetze aufzwingen," *Zeit Online* (August 6, 2012), <http://www.zeit.de/2012/32/Zensur-Apple-Facebook-Amazon-Google> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

¹³ Quoted from <http://www.xbox.com/en-NZ/Live/LIVETermsOfUse> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

The company reserves all rights for itself and offers no protection whatsoever to its users. The language is similar in Facebook's "Statement of Rights and Responsibilities." Essentially, the document lists the obligations and limitations with which its users must comply, whereas the obligations of the company itself are restricted to a rhetorical claim: "We respect other people's rights, and expect you to do the same." The statement goes on to enumerate all the rights that have to be respected.¹⁴ Simply by using Facebook, people are legally committed to following these rules. Moreover, any developer who hopes to design applications for the platform is subject to Facebook's "Platform Policies." This general attitude is reflected in the company's treatment of its users' personal information, as Kurt Opsahl has summarized:

Viewed together, the successive policies tell a clear story. Facebook originally earned its core base of users by offering them simple and powerful controls over their personal information. As Facebook grew larger and became more important, it could have chosen to maintain or improve those controls. Instead, it slowly but surely helped itself – and its advertising and business partners – to more and more of its users' information, while limiting the users' options to control their own information.¹⁵

As the number of users has grown, however, so too has the number of critical users. Such users value the importance of data protection and cultural freedom and are also able to generate awareness about these themes. On all of the present platforms, debates and campaigns have emerged that are directly concerned with the freedom of users and with the terms of use dictated by the companies. When Flickr only made its web application available to German users with its so-called "SafeSearch" filter, this prompted a protest that took place on the platform itself.¹⁶ The company decided to take such controversial measures on account of Germany's strict attitude toward protecting minors from pornographic images. Users, however, posted numerous photographs that accused the site of censorship.

14 Facebook's "Statement of Rights and Responsibilities" can be read at https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=183538190300 (accessed on August 5, 2014).

15 Kurt Opsahl, "Facebook's Eroding Privacy Policy: A Timeline," *Business Insider* (April 30, 2010), <http://www.businessinsider.com/facebooks-eroding-privacy-policy-a-timeline-2010-4> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

16 See Konrad Lischka, "Zwangfilter: Flickr verbietet Deutschen Nacktfotos," *Spiegel Online* (June 14, 2007), <http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/zwangfilter-flickr-verbietet-deutschen-nacktfotos-a-488542.html> (accessed on August 5, 2014).



FIGURE 2: An image posted in protest by a user of Flickr (CC: caro-li)

On Facebook, too, people have used the infrastructure and interface to raise criticism about the company's guidelines and practices. With status updates, users warned one another about the newly adopted changes to privacy settings and gave each other tips on how to ensure that as little of their content as possible would be shared with potential advertisers. These efforts soon went "viral" on the site itself. In numerous petitions for a "dislike button" (with which users could object to certain data-protection provisions and other issues), attempts were made to confront the company with direct criticism. These protests were not restricted to the platform's own infrastructure but rather took place on various websites; in fact, a site called "Facebook Protest" was even set up for this very purpose.¹⁷ William Uricchio was right to point out that the debates about cultural freedom and terms of use – debates that suddenly transformed users or consumers into citizens – have raised important questions about the very role that companies ought to play.¹⁸ As citizens, users can urge legislators to ensure that such companies will abide by data-protection laws. In the case of popular sites like Facebook, a critical dynamic has quickly developed and spread to the point of entering the political

¹⁷ See <http://facebookprotest.com/>.

¹⁸ William Uricchio, "Cultural Citizenship in the Age of P2P Networks," in *European Culture and the Media*, ed. Ib Bondebjerg and Peter Golding (Bristol: Intellect, 2004), 139–64.

discourse; politicians, in other words, are now feeling pressure to enact the agenda of a new focus group.¹⁹ Companies have attempted to counteract these developments by sending lobbyists of their own to sway the discourse in their favor.²⁰

In addition to the possibility of using platforms to voice criticism about the companies that run them, it is also possible for designs to be appropriated. A plug-in for Firefox called “Unfuck Facebook” allows people to use the site in a form that is stripped down to its basic functions. A site called Open Book demonstrates the extent to which personal status updates on Facebook are made accessible to the broader public if users do not take it upon themselves to adjust their privacy settings. An application known as “Give Me My Data” allows users to download and export all of the information they have posted on Facebook.²¹ Like the somewhat older but lesser-known service “Seppukoo,” the service referred to as the “Web 2.0 Suicide Machine” enables irritated users of Facebook, Twitter, or Linked-In to deactivate their profiles.²² An annual “Quit Facebook Day” has been established to encourage discontent users to abandon the network, and nearly forty thousand of such users promised to leave the site on May 31, 2010.²³ Whereas these examples are creative forms of expressing dissent by means of web applications (not by means of petitions), there is also the possibility of simply using alternative platforms. One alternative to Facebook, as Geert Lovink noted in 2010, is a platform called Diaspora, which was then still under development.²⁴ Diaspora is a social network site much like Facebook or Google Plus, which it resembles quite closely in appearance, but unlike the commercial providers it aims to grant users the maximum amount of control both over the technology itself and its terms of use. Participation in the site is not supposed to be like the merely ostensible participation in Facebook’s votes, mentioned above, but will rather involve a systemically inherent integration into the decision-making process, an open discussion of design elements and terms of use, and the implementation of shared values into the software design. Diaspora would thus correspond more closely to the model of Wikipedia, where the difficult processes of user participation and communal decision-making have more or less been resolved.²⁵ However, Diaspora was never able to live up to these expectations. Shortly after it was launched, its development team fell apart, and the platform never created enough momentum to lure a significant number of people away from Facebook. In 2014, the “Facebook killer” was supposed to be a platform called Ello, which was enthusiastically welcomed by commentators critical of Facebook. As of now, however, it has yet to prove whether it can be viable alternative. If Lovink

19 On a similar note, the Pirate Party in Germany has been using its internet competence to fill a gap in the German political landscape.

20 See Javier Cáceres, “Internetkonzerne schreiben bei Datenschutzregeln mit,” *Süddeutsche.de* (February 11, 2013), <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/lobby-einfluss-auf-neue-eu-verordnung-internetkonzerne-schreiben-bei-datenschutzregeln-mit-1.1596560> (accessed on August 5, 2014).

21 See <http://givememydata.com/> (accessed on August 6, 2014).

22 See <http://seppukoo.com> and <http://suicidemachine.org> (both accessed on August 6, 2014).

23 See <http://quitfacebookday.com/> (accessed on August 6, 2012).

24 Morgan Curie, “Geert Lovink: ‘Critique of the Free and Open’ Keynote,” *Masters of Media* (November 10, 2010), <http://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl/2010/11/10/geert-lovink-critique-of-the-free-and-open-keynote/> (accessed on August 6, 2014). This is a summary of Lovink’s keynote address delivered in Berlin at the Open Culture Research Conference, which was held on October 8–10, 2010.

25 See Joseph Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

offers any criticism regarding alternative platforms and the rebellious activity of their users, it is that they will inevitably confront problems when trying to evade the economic logic of the internet.²⁶ A large-scale exodus of users from the popular social networks, however maligned they might be, is highly unlikely on account of social reasons. Jonathan Zittrain has discussed this sort of “social lock-in” in the following terms:

[These are] winner-take-all network effects that say that, after a particular appliance or platform is dominating the [user’s] environment, there are reasons why it would be awfully hard to leave. I can’t necessarily leave Facebook with all the stuff I’ve contributed, all the mouse droppings that comprise my newsfeed, [and] all the other people can’t simultaneously leave with me.²⁷

It hardly would have been necessary for Facebook to take any legal action against the creators of the “Web 2.0 Suicide Machine.” Its users are not overwhelmingly ready to leave the site on account of the protests, and most people are unwilling to give up all the contacts that they have formed there, not to mention all the communication that has been saved and the social status that they have cultivated. In fact, Facebook has responded to criticism in a rather flexible manner. Privacy settings have been set up that at least leave users with the impression that they are better able to control their personal information. It is now even possible for users to download all the data that have posted on the site, including all the communication that they have contributed to the social network. Within the limits of its business model, the company has gone some way to meet its customers’ demands, and these gestures have only been possible because of its vast number of users. The example of MySpace has shown how quickly even a large and successful platform can lose its participants; in April of 2011 alone, approximately ten million people left what was once the model project of the “social web.”

In this light, Mark Zuckerberg’s statesmanlike appearance in the video message to Facebook’s users seems to have been based on his awareness that the merely rhetorical notion of participation had to be followed by a more genuine, though limited, form of the same. It is for this reason that critical users are now treated as constructive collaborators and offered the opportunity to critique the company’s guidelines in comment sections. The rather effective result of this is that the “sovereignty” of the company and of its regulations has been established and legitimized collectively. Zuckerberg’s appearance also fits neatly into the political discourse that he wishes to foster; he and other internet entrepreneurs have been invited to conferences and summit meetings convened by leading political figures.²⁸

While both politicians and the commercial providers of platforms have been paying lip service to the idea of civic participation, empowered user groups have demanded a genuine reevaluation of these new public spheres. The cuddly notion of community togetherness, which Clay Shirky and Charles Leadbeater have considered to be the basic quality of popular web

²⁶ Whereas Wikipedia has managed to remain financially independent and has been able to rely on voluntary contributions from the Wikipedia community (in addition to the administrative work of its permanent staff), Diaspora has yet to establish such an infrastructure.

²⁷ Jonathan Zittrain, “Jonathan Zittrain on Big Think,” *BigThink.com* (2009), <http://bigthink.com/jonathanzittrain> (this site is no longer active).

²⁸ Zuckerberg was invited to the G8 summit in Paris, and Barack Obama has held a so-called “town hall meeting” at Facebook’s headquarters. The event streamed live on Facebook.

platforms, is in fact the depoliticized and commodified form of “social media.”²⁹ Here the political is reduced a “like button,” with which it is possible to show one’s sympathy for the democratic activists in the Near and Middle East. Academics have criticized the popular web platforms chiefly on account of their dubious power structures,³⁰ and this criticism has focused especially on the companies’ violations of the private sphere (the misuse of personal information) and on their generation of profit from work that has been performed by others.³¹ As I discussed above, the users of such platforms also criticized their regulations, but they did so within the limits set by the technical designs of the platforms themselves. Even if the economic logic of web-based industries poses a considerable challenge to alternative models, it is also true that the mere “social” connection that people have with the popular platforms will discourage large numbers of users from moving to an alternative provider.

While popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Flickr have evoked criticism from their users, they have simultaneously served as important infrastructures for socio-political debates. Independent of the criticism directed at the platforms themselves, these discussions have generated awareness for political themes, organized activism, and helped to spread information. Commercial providers, in other words, have not only provoked critical responses from a limited number of their own users; they have also provided a service to civic activists by offering an infrastructure for political organization. In doing so, the platforms reveal their potential for generating public spheres. They contribute a network of numerous applications and activities that have considerably expanded the sphere of public discourse. Noteworthy, too, is the heterogeneity of public spheres in digital space, where commercial platforms are directly connected to the content provided by alternative, independent, or non-commercial sources.

III. Technology-Driven Political Change

Ever since “social media” such as Facebook and Twitter were attributed a central role in the uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring, they have been described as a new form of civic activism. This has ranged from the innocent enthusiasm of their users to serious efforts to assign the platforms a prominent role in American foreign policy. In his programmatic essay “The Political Power of Social Media,” Clay Shirky has pointed out the emancipatory effects of social media in the process of transforming repressive regimes.³² With his great trust in media technology as an

29 See Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (New York: Penguin, 2010); and Charles Leadbeater, *We-Think: Mass Innovation, Not Mass Production* (London: Profile, 2008).

30 See Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch, eds., *Unlike Us: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013).

31 See, for example, Trebor Scholz, “Market Ideology and the Myths of Web 2.0,” *First Monday* 13 (2008), <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/2138/1945>; Michael Zimmer, “The Externalities of Search 2.0: the Emerging Privacy Threats When the Drive for the Perfect Search Engine Meets Web 2.0,” *First Monday* 13 (2008), <http://www.firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2136/1944> (both sites were accessed on August 6, 2014); and Trebor Scholz, ed., *Digital Labor: the Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

32 See Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” *Foreign Affairs* 90 (February 2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media> (accessed on August 6,

agent of political change, Shirky thus situates himself within the long history of media being used for political ends.³³ As early as the 1950s, Marshall McLuhan made the following remark: “We can win China and India for the West only by giving them the new media. Russia will not give these to them.”³⁴ As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton of course did have complete trust in the use of technology for political change; in her initiative for “internet freedom,” however, she did stress that free access to information can be a catalyst for social and economic progress:

We are convinced that an open internet fosters long-term peace, progress, and prosperity. The reverse is also true. An internet that is closed and fractured, where different governments can block activity or change the rules on a whim – where speech is censored or punished, and privacy does not exist – that [...] is an internet that can cut off opportunities for peace and progress and discourage innovation and entrepreneurship.³⁵

While these warnings about a closed and fractured internet were implicitly directed toward the Chinese government, the political establishment in the United States – in an ironic twist – was simultaneously pressuring corporations and institutions to cut off all resources to WikiLeaks, a platform for whistleblowers.³⁶ This is an especially vivid example of the balancing act of politics. After welcoming the emancipatory potential of internet-based forms of civic self-organization, the political sphere then turned around to treat the phenomenon with skepticism. For years, politicians had ignored the socio-formative potential of dispersed and internet-based public spheres while also underestimating the extent to which society was being transformed.³⁷ For some time, the internet was perceived simply as a new money-making zone for e-commerce and the information economy, and political participation was largely restricted to the liberalization of telecommunications markets. During all of this, civil society was supposed to play the role of consumer. This attitude is exemplified, for instance, in the Clinton Administration’s conception of the “information superhighway,” which Al Gore described as follows in 1997:

We are on the verge of a revolution that is just as profound as the change in the economy that came with the industrial revolution. Soon electronic networks will allow people to transcend the barriers of time and distance and take advantage of global markets and business opportunities not even imaginable today, opening up a new world of economic possibility and progress.³⁸

2014).

33 For an excellent description of media innovations that were politically motivated, see Dieter Daniels, *Kunst als Sendung: Von der Telegraphie zum Internet* (Munich: Beck, 2000).

34 Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Transmediale, 2011), n.p.

35 Quoted from Dan Sabbagh, “Hillary Clinton’s Speech: Shades of Hypocrisy on Internet Freedom,” *The Guardian* (February 15, 2011), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/15/hillary-clinton-internet-freedom> (accessed on August 6, 2014).

36 On the case of WikiLeaks, see the contribution by Christoph Bieber in this volume.

37 Citing the example of the German Green Party, a recent article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* discussed the failure of established political parties to recognize the socio-political aspects of the internet. Incompetence regarding the internet, however, can be attributed to all the major parties; in fact, it was such incompetence that fueled the recent formation of thematic parties such as the Pirate Party. See Jan Ludwig, “Grüne und Piraten: Die Freibeuter der Leere,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (November 24, 2011), <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/digitales-denken/gruene-und-piraten-die-freibeuter-der-leere-11538418.html> (accessed on August 6, 2014).

In the case of social media and their easy-to-use interfaces, this new world of economic possibility and progress has expanded to include broader aspects of society, including civic participation and collective production. According to the so-called “Eurobaromator,” which was used by the authors of the comprehensive *Study on the Social Impact of ICT*, almost all young Europeans and almost all Europeans with an advanced degree use the internet. Twenty-five percent of the poorly educated population is online, and thirty-eight percent of the older generation uses online services in one way or another. The differences between urban and rural areas are considered to be insignificant.³⁹ The online activity of these users differs little from the online activity in the United States, which the Pew Research Center has investigated in numerous studies.⁴⁰ The most common activities include using social network sites, downloading music and videos, shopping and banking online, and the rather vague “searching for information.”⁴¹ That said, the *Study on the Social Impact of ICT* also shows that, at least in the European Union, the new information infrastructures and new media practices have not been seamlessly integrated into broader society or civic life. The authors note that the political sphere has not succeeded in using new media to increase civic participation. On the contrary, Jan A. G. M. van Dijk refers explicitly to the gradual decline of European citizens’ engagement in public life that has been taking place over the last twenty-five years.⁴² Although Van Dijk acknowledges the emancipatory potential of new media, he finds that their use, far from constituting a sort of collective and socio-formative undertaking, can best be described as individualized activity:

Online activities contribute to the individualized kind of participation and individual citizen emancipation described. The contemporary citizen acts from his/her own environment and experiences and s(h)e inserts these experiences in public opinion, among others the online public sphere. There is less deductive reasoning from collective political, social or cultural interests.⁴³

Sobering, too, are the results of the study regarding the efforts of political administrations to encourage citizens, by means of new media, to participate actively in society, culture, and politics. The authors maintain that there is no indication at all that administrations have had any success in their efforts to reach out to citizens via eParticipation initiatives. Such government-imposed initiatives promise to be less successful than the so-called grass-roots

38 William J. Clinton and Albert Gore, “A Framework for Global Economic Commerce” (December 1, 1997), <http://www.w3.org/TR/NOTE-framework-970706> (accessed on August 6, 2014).

39 Of course, the study also claims that there is “digital divide” in Europe between the West and East (and the North and South). The Scandinavian countries are the most connected of all and have the most diversified online media practices, whereas the Eastern European countries have room to grow in this regard. See Gyorgy Lengyel et al., “Report on Findings from Flash Eurobarometer,” in *Study on the Social Impact of ICT*, Topic Report 3 (April 30, 2010), 474–587, at 492 (http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=5789; accessed on August 6, 2014).

40 For Pew’s findings regarding online trends, see <http://www.pewinternet.org/three-technology-revolutions/> (accessed on August 7, 2014).

41 Ellen Helsper et al., “Consumption (Incl. Media and Entertainment),” in *Study on the Social Impact of ICT*, 181–225, at 182–83.

42 Jan A. G. M. van Dijk, “Conceptual Framework,” in *Study on the Social Impact of ICT*, 1–31, at 20.

43 *Ibid.*, 21.

activities initiated by the citizens themselves. In fact, it can be said that governments and political administrations have experimented with electronic participation *not* to include citizens in the political decision-making process but rather simply to bolster their own legitimacy: “The main motive for governments and public administration to start experimenting with eParticipation is to close the gap that is perceived to be growing between governments and citizens and to boost the legitimacy of government policy and administrative decisions.”⁴⁴ It is therefore hardly surprising that the big players in the internet industry (Zuckerberg among them) are regularly invited to participate in political summit meetings. With their pseudo-democracy and extensively controlled user activities, commercial platforms are presumably regarded as prototypes for the online democracy that governments wish to establish. Zuckerberg’s jovial and patriarchal dominion is opposed by ad-hoc collectives, by temporary zones of autonomy, and by the multiplicity of “alternative” media tools and practices.⁴⁵ The critics of Web 2.0 and social media often overlook the fact that, at least temporarily, its free applications can be used in ways that are far different from their intended purpose. Platforms are exchangeable and their economy is subject to their volatile user numbers. For distributing messages, for instance, established social media are better suited than obscure alternatives, where there are fewer users to disseminate information. As Ethan Zuckerman has pointed out, the popular platforms are, for a variety of reasons, quite useful for inciting political dissent. For example, if authorities take down a service like YouTube, this action will not go unnoticed. The technical infrastructures of these large platforms are better equipped to handle large numbers of requests, and they are even able to withstand DDOS attacks.⁴⁶

In discussions about the emancipatory potential of new media, three elements can be identified that need to be examined in closer detail. First is the possibility of mobilizing masses and raising awareness about certain issues; second is free access to information or data; and third is the expansion of traditional political discourses into online public spheres. These three elements are directly connected to one another. In the popular discourse, they are often reduced to particular platforms, whose brand names then become synonymous with the media practice itself. The mobilization of the masses in the Near East is now inseparably associated with Twitter; free access to information is usually discussed with the term “open data”; and the promise of transparency and free access to sensitive information is identified with WikiLeaks. The third aspect, namely the expansion (or multiplication) of the public sphere, was associated with the “blogosphere” until social media usurped the dominant position of the blog.

The old fantasy of a critical and enlightened public is inherent to each of these elements and is treated in various ways in the popular discourse. However, the ambivalent nature of technology and the heterogeneity of media practices prevent us from unequivocally ascribing an emancipatory character to the media themselves. That said, the media are central actors in the transformation of the public sphere. Stefan Münker has shown that the “social” aspect of “social media” manifests itself in the constitution of spaces and practices that have traditionally

44 Jan A. G. M. van Dijk, “Participation in Policy-Making,” in *Study on the Social Impact of ICT*, 31–79, at 67.

45 Such alternatives have been the topic of the three “Unlike Us” conferences that have been sponsored by Institute of Network Cultures at the University of Amsterdam.

46 See Ethan Zuckerman, “The Cute Cat Theory Talk at ETech,” *My Heart’s in Accra* (March 8, 2008), <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etech/> (accessed on November 11, 2014).

been understood as “public spheres” in the Habermasian sense.⁴⁷ However, the public sphere should not be reduced to Habermas’s normatively formulated concept of a homogeneous citizenry. With reference to a more recent definition of the public sphere, suggested by Habermas himself, it is perhaps best to understand it as a network for communicating information and opinions.⁴⁸ In light of this pragmatic reduction, and in light of Nancy Fraser’s concept of “strong publics” and “weak publics,”⁴⁹ the partial public spheres that exist online can certainly be described as “weak.” Although it has admittedly been questioned whether online platforms can be regarded as forming public spheres,⁵⁰ such media practices and technologies ultimately do nothing else than constitute a network for disseminating information and opinions. In general, this network cannot be said to fulfill the normative demands for rational debate, for egalitarian participation, and for the strict separation of governments and citizens. On the contrary, the following examples will show that the new media encourage heterogeneous and dispersed public spheres, within which specific media practices are used in attempts to reach a broader public audience.

IV. Mobilizing the Masses

The network qualities of new media make it possible to mobilize large numbers of participants. Howard Rheingold has referred to these groups, which are supported by communications technologies, as “smart mobs.”⁵¹ Mobile phones and text messages can temporarily function as “tactical media” that are able to spread information far more effectively than the established media services.⁵² In an information vacuum or in a strongly regulated media environment, these alternative means of spreading information can reach quite a large audience. As an example of this, Rheingold cited the organization of demonstrations against the Philippine president Joseph Estrada in 2001. Shirky has added the example of the demonstrations in Spain in 2004; in this case, citizens used text messages to organize protests against the conservative government and its response to the terrorist bombings in Madrid.⁵³ Activists at the Institute for Applied Autonomy have attempted to formalize such practices and to develop applications for the promotion of civic autonomy. Among such applications is “TXTMob,” a program that allows text messages to be sent to a large number of mobile phones.⁵⁴ Its purpose is to enable demonstrators to organize more effectively and to send quick messages regarding police

47 Münker, *Emergenz digitaler Öffentlichkeiten* (cited in note 5 above).

48 See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

49 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), 56–80, esp. 74–77.

50 See Jodi Dean, “Why the Net is Not a Public Sphere,” *Constellations* 10 (2013), 95–112; and Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010).

51 Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2003).

52 See Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 254.

53 Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” n.p.

54 TXTMob can be downloaded from the Institute for Applied Autonomy’s website: <http://www.appliedautonomy.com/txtmob.html> (accessed on August 7, 2014).

activity. The commercial counterpart to TXTMob, namely Twitter, has been credited for the successful mobilization of demonstrators after the elections in Iran.⁵⁵ In 2009, the U.S. State Department allegedly intervened with Twitter's maintenance schedule to ensure that the service would be available to Iranians on their election day.⁵⁶ Whereas Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr were used to disseminate news from Tehran and other Iranian cities, proxy servers were set up for activists to circumvent Iran's tightly controlled internet infrastructure.⁵⁷ Both Google and Facebook posted Persian translations of their services.⁵⁸ On the so-called Insurgency Wiki, the loose collective known as "Anonymous" urged users to wage a "denial of distributed services attack" to shut down a website run by the Iranian security forces.⁵⁹ While the dispersed online public spheres were busy expressing sympathy for democratic activists in repressive regimes, the criticized authorities attempted to win over public opinion in the blogosphere and to block the communication channels of activists with (mostly Western) technologies.⁶⁰

V. The Expansion of Political Discourses

The media practices mentioned above require varying levels of technological competence. In general, it is crucial for participation in online public spheres to be possible with minimal or even no technical knowledge. Such is the case, for instance, with blogging services such as Google's Blogger.com. For their part, Twitter and Facebook allow internet users to publish online without any technical know-how. This simplification of the publication process has led to an exponential increase in the number of blogs.⁶¹ The blogosphere consists in large part of casual bloggers who write about their favorite topics. There is also a large number of authors whose blogs are associated with their professional interests or are directly related to their professional activity. Only a small group of people earn their living by blogging. The

55 Lev Grossman, "Iran Protests: Twitter, the Medium of the Movement," *Time* (June 17, 2009), <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html> (accessed on August 6, 2014).

56 Ibid.

57 Here it should be noted that Internet Relay Chat (IRC), though typically overlooked in the popular discourse, has been a frequently used channel of communication.

58 Cyrus Farivar, *The Internet of Elsewhere: The Emergent Effects of a Wired World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 156.

59 The website in question was Gerdab.ir, which published photographs of demonstrators with the hope that visitors would identify them. Anonymous responded by asking users to install a program called *Epic Fail Cannon*, which can be used to bombard a targeted address with a vast number of requests. In an updated version of the program, called *Low Orbit Ion Cannon*, the application can be controlled by a third party to exhaust the computing and network capacities of targeted websites. For a good description of this process, see Aiko Pras et al., "Attacks by 'Anonymous' WikiLeaks Proponents not Anonymous," *CTIT Technical Report 10.41* (December 10, 2010), <http://doc.utwente.nl/75331/1/2010-12-CTIT-TR.pdf> (accessed on August 6, 2014). The URL of the Insurgency Wiki is frequently changed; at the present moment it is as follows: http://dnathe4th.porfusion.com/partyvan/07-31-08/index.php/Main_Page.html (accessed on August 8, 2014).

60 Farivar, *The Internet of Elsewhere*, 6. In his book *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), Evgeny Morozov offered a counter-argument against the success stories of internet activism and demonstrated how repressive regimes have used new media with great success to oppress dissent and activism.

61 See *Technorati's* annual reports on the "State of the Blogosphere," a feature that was renamed in 2013 as the "Digital Influence Report": <http://technorati.com/report/2013-dir/> (accessed on August 8, 2014).

blogosphere provides a space for commentary and serves as an alternative outlet for ideas that are not always expressed or covered by the established media.⁶²

In addition to “traditional” blogs, there are now micro-blogging services such as Twitter.⁶³ In a recent study of the Dutch political “Twittersphere,” my colleagues and I have shown that this short-messaging service is by now an integral component of both the blogosphere and the traditional media landscape. In fact, an analysis of actively tweeting members of parliament and a select group of Twitter accounts (each of which is followed by at least four politicians) suggests that Twitter should be regarded as an expansion of the public sphere.⁶⁴ On a qualitative level, we were able to show that the participants in this sample were largely engaged in discussing political issues, running campaigns, and calling attention to their respective positions. Communication took place between members of civil society, politicians, numerous journalists, and various PR representatives. Here there is thus a mixture of the strong and weak publics, those that are actively engaged in the legislative process and those that are engaged in formulating political opinions. Such debates are closely associated with the daily political commentary in the traditional media. Almost every other tweet in our sample contained a hyperlink to a website, many of which belonged to established media outlets. These outlets themselves are actively tweeting, either from accounts representing the media companies in question or from accounts used by journalists to promote their own publications. The tweets by politicians are often direct responses to reports in the press.⁶⁵

With Twitter, users are able both to send and receive messages. Politicians like Geert Wilders use their accounts exclusively as senders and never respond to messages that have been sent to them with the request to “@reply.” The analysis became rather interesting at the micro-level, however. Here it was revealed that small networks of relations were created within the national Twittersphere by the mutual exchange of tweets (@reply and @mention). Figure 3 shows a “retweet” network from the Dutch political sphere; in particular, it displays the accounts retweeted by member of the Dutch parliament. The more popular an account became, the more frequently it would be retweeted, and the more an account has been retweeted by the overall political spectrum, the more it is emphasized in the visualization. At the core of this process are journalists, political commentators, PR experts, young politicians (who are especially willing to make use of new means of communication), bloggers, and engaged citizens of the online public sphere in the Netherlands. The result is an intricate and informal information network that represents a new channel beyond the networks that are already in place. Of course, not everyone participates in this medium, but the network is nevertheless surprisingly

62 Such outlets also include politically radical platforms such as the German anti-Muslim blog *Politically Incorrect*: <http://www.pi-news.net/> (accessed on August 8, 2014).

63 Twitter allows messages to be sent that do not exceed 140 characters. Twitter users can subscribe to receive the messages of other users by “following” them, and many users are followed by thousands of people. For instance, Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom, has more than 330,000 followers.

64 See Mirko Tobias Schäfer et al., “Politiek in 140 tekens,” in *Voorgeprogrammeerd: Hoe Internet ons leven leidt*, ed. Christian van 't Hof et al. (The Hague: Rathenau Instituut, 2012), 193–214. Over the course of five weeks in October and November of 2011, we saved all the tweets produced by our sample, which consisted of ninety-seven politicians in the Dutch parliament and 383 Twitter users that were “followed” by at least four politicians. The number of saved messages reached 124,000.

65 Over the course of our study, the most “tweeted-about” media production was the television program *Pauw & Wittemann*, a political talk-show.

heterogeneous and shows that the distance between journalists, bloggers, active citizens, and professional politicians has become smaller. There is some indication, moreover, that active Twitter users are capable of generating a good deal of public attention and debate about political issues.

The mobilization of participants, the generation of attention, access to information, and the establishment of networks of political discourse are each integral elements of the transforming public sphere. However, the often-presumed emancipatory potential of such activity on Twitter is only one side of the story. Applications such as Facebook can also serve as platforms for political criticism, just as Twitter can be used as a pure broadcasting medium or as an effective PR instrument to make a politician seem “internet savvy.”

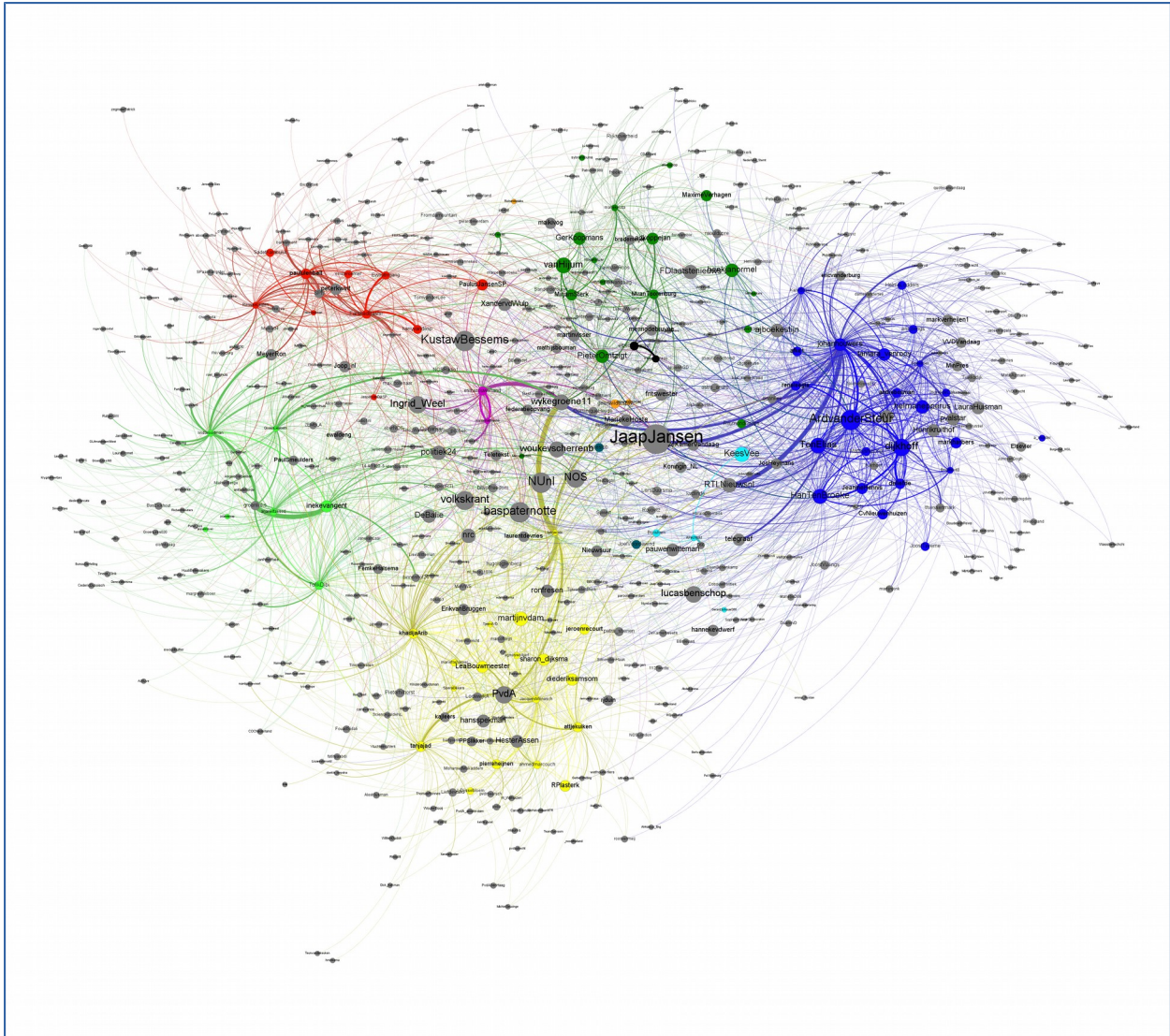
VI. The Public Sphere in Transition

The extensive integration of new media into all aspects of society has brought about a new set of challenges. For one, the multiplication of public spheres now means that every opinion can find a publication niche on the internet. At the same time, many of these internal discourses are associated with those of the mainstream media and can occasionally capture the attention of the broader public. A homogeneous public sphere exists neither online nor offline. Yet the dynamic of fragmentation and clustering appears to be even more volatile online than offline. The audiences for political discussions are volatile, and attention can only be held temporarily. Debates concerning geopolitical issues resemble those concerning the technical designs of web applications, at least to the extent that they focus on cultural freedom or the personal integrity of users. Often enough, online attention is dictated by instant reactions, gut feelings, shock, and amusement. The sensational, the appalling, the shocking receives a great deal of attention and creates an incredible noise of redundancy, inadequacy, ignorance and immaturity. This noise distorts informed debate and fuels populism.

The commercial platforms of the “social web” are often treated like public space, even though they are administered by entities that lack democratic legitimacy. Facebook’s various programs encouraging user participation are attempts to give off the appearance of collectively legitimized sovereignty. With their attempts to initiate technology-based civic participation, governments, too, seem to be doing nothing more than waging PR campaigns to corroborate their own legitimacy.

For engaged citizens, the new media certainly offer certain possibilities to participate in socio-political debates. It has become commonplace in the new media landscape for the discourse to be opened up to those who are not members of the professional media. The question remains about how governments and political administrations intend to use the new media, that is, whether they are genuinely interested in integrating civic engagement or are rather inclined to follow Facebook’s model of controlled participation.

FIGURE 3: A graph of the “retweets” exchanged by members of the political Twittersphere in the Netherlands (created by Thomas Boeschoten with Gephi visualization software and the algorithm Force Atlas 2)



These questions, among others, will have to be negotiated in light of the new role assigned to citizens and users on the Web 2.0, that is, on the “commodified” version of the internet. Here lawmakers will have the opportunity to limit the ability of companies to control user data and to profit from such information.

In the end, a new and dynamic type of interaction has emerged between the emulation of traditional forms of political organization and the constitution of new (counter)publics with online media. It has also become clear, moreover, that questions of proprietorship and the legal integration of platforms are not the only issues of socio-political importance. Significant, too, is the role of software design, which ultimately contributes to the formation of something like a “programmed public sphere.” In light of governmental efforts to use new media to encourage electronic civic participation and to model these efforts according to the regulatory structures imposed by the leading companies in the internet industry, it is necessary to hold an informed and critical discussion about these new technologies and their socio-political implications. The

challenge facing the field of media studies is to develop methods for analyzing the technological foundation that underlies both current representations of power and the oppositional establishment of counterpublics.