Can Virtual Spaces Become Political Public Spheres: The Internet Forums of the City of Tampere?

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1. Introduction

The public sphere is a concept that is widely used in social scientific discussions describing the relationship between citizen political participation and emerging information and communications technologies. New ICT innovations, especially the Internet related, are defined to extend and construct political public sphere(s) (see e.g. Wilhelm 2000, Dahlberg 2001, Schalken 2000, Fernback 1997, Keane 2000, Sassi 2000, Poster 1997). As Anthony Wilhelm explains in his book "Democracy in the Digital Age": democratic practice in the public sphere signifies 'the vital channels in civil society in which individuals and groups can become informed about issues, discuss and debate these issues autonomously, and ultimately have an impact on policy agendas' (Wilhelm 2000, 9). The Internet is given the democratic potential, which refers extensively to the notion of citizen empowering publicness (see e.g. Tsagarousianou 1998, 174-176).

According to John Keane, the new microelectronic technologies strengthen 'the hand of individual reception and *narrowcasting* against conventional broadcasting patterns and *socialize* certain tools communication by encouraging the perception of communication as complex *flows of opinion* through networks of public spheres' (Keane 1991, xii, see also 160-162). However it has to be noted that today's mediated publicness is still mainly created by the traditional mass media, and it is fair to say that the traditional media contributions to modern societies' public spheres are extensive in relation to the ones constructed and maintained on the Internet (see e.g. Dahlgren, 2001, 44, Sassi, 2000, 98-99). In any case, it is obsolete to speak of a unitary public sphere in times in which state-structured and territorially bounded publicity is coming to its end. The plurality, diversity and complexity of the communities has caused that the definition of publicness is subject to 'the development of a complex mosaic of differently sized, overlapping and interconnected public spheres that force us radically to revise our understanding of public life'. (Keane 2000, 76.) It can be emphasised that the Internet, by its far-reaching emergence, is one factor that impacts on this theoretical and conceptual reconfigurations of the public sphere. As Sinikka Sassi says, the Internet 'encompasses controversial qualities and elicits conflicting tendencies such as fragmentation and unification of various sectional publics' (Sassi 2000, 90). Virtual spaces as phenomena bring for the theoretical consideration human interaction and dynamics, which are

affected by changing virtual identities, and on the other hand, conditioned rule systems, habits and traditions (Schalken 2000, 168), and also the features of contingency and unpredictability of political action.

2. The public sphere as a traditional concept

The notion of the political public sphere is often presented as historical narrative, which 'thematizes the role of interaction among citizens in the political process'. The definitions are traced back to various versions of what constitutes the public/private polarity and how the idea of 'public' needs to be given its formulations in relation to the processes of democracy (Dahlgren 1997, 7). Commonly, the story of the public sphere is associated with Jürgen Habermas', *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Socieyty* (1989[1962]), thorough narrative account of public communication, in which he points out normative and ideal definitions of the public sphere: a) the notion of the public sphere is based on the authority of the better argument and the status and identities of the participants are disregarded altogether (ibid.,36); b) the public sphere constitutes a publicness and space, where private citizens have universal access to debate issues of common concern and present criticism against governmental authorities (ibid., 36-37, 83, 85); c) the public sphere establishes its publics 'as in principle inclusive', which refers to the institutionalized conscious of publics 'of being part of larger public', and discursive, critical publicness conceptually distinct from the public authority and the realm of commodity exchange and social labor (ibid., 30, 37); d) the debating participants of the public sphere make the authorities accountable and in touch with the needs of society (ibid, 30-31, 36-37).

Since this much-quoted general theory of the emergence of 'a liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere' and its downfall within the development of 'welfare-state mass democracy', Habermas has undertaken a theoretical shift in developing a modernized theory for the conditions of contempory society, in which he understands the potential for critical publicness to emerge from informal communication processes of civil society (Rättilä 2000, 48). In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996, 360-363) Habermas states that 'the public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view' which is characterized by discursive and associational public. In this

respect the public sphere comes to be defined as a social phenomenon, conceived 'as elementary as action, actor, association, or collectivity' (Rättilä 2000, 48). Firstly, when generalized in this way, the political public sphere contracts to informal content of a dialogical social space generated in communicative action (Habermas 1996 362-363). Secondly, whereas the public sphere refers to 'a social space opened up between social actors when they engage in a dialogue', it refers also to a differentiated and 'overlapping subcultural publics, which shape the processes of informal opinion– and will-formation uncoupled from decision-making institutions' (Rättilä 2000, 48-49). The habermasian account of the public sphere manifests the vital role of pluralist publicness and public spheres to viable democracy (rf. Dahlgren 1997, 9), and also its role as an intermediary 'between civil society and procedurally regulated public sphere' (Rättilä 2000, 48).

3. Deliberative democracy theory and Internet participation

Altogether, Habermas's model on dialogical publics has influenced to the dominant new element of democratic theory, deliberative democracy theory. It has been noted that the deliberative democracy theory is a response to habermasian abstract democracy model, but also habermasian thinking has given its important contribution for the theory. (see e.g. Saward 2000, 5, Rättilä 2000, 42.) Deliberative democracy theory is not actually distinct from the ideas proposed by the traditional participatory democracy theory. Deliberative theory can be generally defined as an approach, which aims for a construction of ideal standards for political deliberation.[1] According to the deliberative ideal, a democratic community's political resolutions proceed and occur in the process of public argumentation and reasoning, in which participants are equal citizens. When the citizens take part in this process they commit themselves to solving problems and making choices collectively. The citizens regard as legitime only those institutions, in which decision-making is conducted via free and public deliberation (Cohen 1989, 21). In a deliberative democratic community people assemble voluntarily to argue and find a solution to a political conflict (see e.g. Knight & Johnson 1994, 285). When political

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[1] The concept of deliberative democracy is quite new-found and it has been at disposal veritably from 1980s. The theoretical approach consists of the critic of liberal democracy, commenced in 1970s, and the theoretical discourse of consensual politics that was displayed by participatory democracy theory (Bohman & Rehg 1997, xii). The theory explicates strongly normative approach to political process, which should occur as reformed institutionalized organisations, and be premised on public civil deliberation.

conflicts occur, the deliberative community aims to reach a rationally motivated consensus, which means that common political decisions are rationalized by arguments, which can be accepted by all those who have taken part in the deliberation. However, it can be assumed that political conflicts are by nature such that the requirement for consensus is too demanding. This is the case even in political deliberations that take place in ideal circumstances, and decisions can therefore also be arrived at by a majority rule (Cohen 1989, 23). It is a prerequisite for the legitimacy of the decisions that every citizen is entitled to engage in public deliberation, whereupon the decisions are the consequence of collective political debate and judgement. The legitimacy is composed in the process of deliberation in which everyone's will is constructed. The will then grants the output of the process its legitimacy (Manin 1987, 352). The deliberative procedure is the source of a community's legitimacy, and the arguments put forward in the deliberation are directly connected to output that was decided in the collective process (see Cohen 1989, 21).

The Internet forums of the City of Tampere, especially the Preparation Forum, can be located in an interesting and hypothetical way to the political community constructed by deliberative democracy theory, even though the theory has mainly been applied to face-to-face debates (see e.g. Gutmann & Thompson 1997, 13). In my opinion, face-to-face interaction cannot be the only standard for political deliberation. I would start from the premiss that the deliberation can also take place in electronic network (see e.g. Hill & Hughes 1998, 1-3, 22, Alexander & Pal 1998, 7, Miller 1996, 217, Slevin 2000, 185-186). Moreover, the deliberative forum is considered to be defined by any such setting, in which citizens assemble regularly to make collective decisions about public matters (Gutmann & Thompson 1997, 12, see also Cohen 1989, 21). In this respect, the Preparation Forum's online-meetings are timely structurized according to the assemblies of the committees. The other political deliberations carried out in the other online-forums of the City of Tampere, however, are not orderly meetings in which common decisions are made after profound political debates. Rather, they are temporary and informal deliberations, in which participants intentionally make an effort to contribute to policymaking. In the Preparation Forum, the summaries and reciprocations prepared by the city officials and committee members could be regarded as some kind of political resolutions. In the other online-forums such documents are not composed, and any

political influence that the citizens might have had is filtered through city officials who engage in deliberations.

It must be acknowledged that several theoretical aspects of deliberative democracy theory materialize in the Internet forums. People participate in the deliberations as equal citizens: the participants could be considered as equal speakers and performers in relation of one another. Electronic deliberations – with the provided background information – could be considered as processes of political reasoning and argumentation, and the deliberations are free and public. Presentations are not hindered or restricted by any authority and they are all public. Participation is voluntary and its aim is to influence local politics - although people do not actually have a direct opportunity to contribute to policymaking. However, the explicit aim of the online-forums of the city of Tampere is to improve democracy and the citizens' opportunities to participate in politics. The forums therefore seem to seek a kind of consensual politics by means of argumentative deliberation. The aim of public deliberation is to legitimate future policies. In the forums, participation is reciprocal. Also, background information on the issues under deliberation is provided. This gives the participants an opportunity to justify their arguments and judge arguments delivered by others.

Deliberative democracy theory illustrates and conceptualizes the existence of administrational legitimacy, which is essential for a community. Normatively, administrational legitimacy can be founded only on public deliberation. The advocates of deliberative democracy, however, are not in agreement about those procedures and processes, which would be required were deliberative politics to be widely applied to a society's politics. Deliberative theorists are generally divided into the proponents of *fair proceduralism*[2] and the proponents of the *epistemic standard*[3]. The first group emphasises the need to carry out political deliberation in a just and equal circumstance. The latter group presumes that that the output of deliberation is qualitatively legitimate, when it fulfils an independent standard (see Estlund 1997, 177-181.) This independent standard can broadly be defined as a legitimacy, which requires that each political decision rely on arguments that cannot be opposed by any reasonable citizen (Estlund

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[2] See e.g. Bernard Manin 1987, Gutmann & Thompson 1997, Christiano 1997, Bohman 1997, Knight & Johnson 1994, 1997, Benhabib 1996.
[3] See e.g. Dryzek 1990, Cohen 1989, Rawls 1997.

1997, 175). The standard is conceived of as an argument that is founded on knowledge that cannot be disproved.

Although fair proceduralism excludes strict epistemic standards from the political process, it does not completely discard epistemic definitions. Political deliberations are considered, in almost every theoretical case, as serious deliberations about the common good and justice – a fact that assumes the articulation of normative suggestions. This brings to the fore the assumption that deliberation progresses in the process of correct and incorrect[4] opinions, guided by objectivity (Richardson 1997, 349). Deliberative democracy theory appears to be committed to the cognitivity of the process that it describes, although the degree of the standard of cognitivity varies according to the point of view. In the theoretical discussion the furtherance of the common good and fair justice in the democratic process means that objectivity and cognitivity are emphasised in some way. From the political state of affairs one expects to find conclusions that lead to certainty and knowledge.

4. 'Empowerment' in the Administrational Virtual Public Sphere

Wilhelm (2000, 29-47) defines the normative 'topography of the virtual political public sphere' in describing cyberspace's impinge on the democratic citizen activism. The topography contains four features, which are, according to him, necessary for beneficial political civic participation:

Antecedent resources	The skills and capacities that one brings to the table to achieve certain functions – in this case, participation in the virtual political public sphere
Inclusiveness	Ensuring that everybody affected by a certain policy has the opportunity to access and use esential digital media.
Deliberation	Subjecting one's opinions to public scrutiny for validation.
Design	The architecture of the network developed to facilitate or inhibit public communication.
	(Wilhelm 2000, 36)

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[4] Uncorrect is referred as a political opinion, which cannot be reasoned in a manner that could be widely accepted.

In pointing out, that these four chracteristics are inextricably linked, Wilhelm in the model describes a setting of the deliberative democracy that is supported by many deliberative theorists (see e.g. Bohman 1997, Knigh & Johnson 1997, Christiano 1997, Gutman & Thompson 1997). Given that Wilhelm's concept of 'desingning a democratic virtual public sphere impinges on the topography of cyberspace – namely the size, shape, and location of political spaces in which persons come together to discuss issues, form opinios, or plan action' (2000, 46), he relates evidently to theoretical teledemocratic standpoints in which teledemocracy is defined as an interactive process enabled by new technology, in which political communication becomes networked and diverse. Through the information networks citizens are understood capable to make initiatives, take part in political planning and discuss the effects of decision-making (se e.g. Becker & Slaton 2000, Becker & Scarce 1987, Keskinen 1995, Savolainen & Anttiroiko 1999). In this respect teledemocracy is today associated with technical systems (such as the Preparation Forum and other online-forums of the City of Tampere) that are enabled by new information and communication technology, especially the Internet. The Internet – understood theoretically in the context of electronic democracy – is defined an instrument that enables the democratic ideal of citizen who is active and aware of societal issues. The Internet-forums combined with the dispensing of information is understood to construct a potential environment for reasoned public deliberation

According to Savolainen & Anttiroiko participation in the public debates of a deliberative electronic democracy necessitates that citizens possess sufficient capabilities to express themselves and to search for and make use of background information to support arguments (Savolainen & Anttiroiko 1999, 35). In an interactive information society, then, citizenship refers to a proactive actor who is a part of the process of producing new information as he/she participates in reciprocal communication (Keskinen 1995, 20, 23). According to this definition, public argumentation, individual opinions and the background information they include develop into a kind of *process of spiral feedback*[5], which builds a positive and supportive ambience in the political community. According to Kenneth Hacker this kind of interactivity aspires not only to

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[5] Keskinen operates with the definition in describing the information society's interactional communication process (Keskinen 1995, 23).

attenuate societal uncertainty, but also to construct political definitions and policies by way of close co-operation. In this kind of electronic deliberation it is not important that messages are replied to quickly. The essential factors are the quality and information content of a response (Hacker 1996, 228). According to Scott London, rational dialogue and political deliberation are possible in a network environment whose operation is founded on horizontal networks of co-operation and mutual trust between citizens (London 1997, 8[www-document]). According to this interpretation, electronic political activity should manifest itself as reasonable political deliberation, which accumulates social capital. In this kind of political deliberation, reasoned and confidence inspiring dialogue are meant to balance and solve political conflicts.

Wilhelm explicates with respect to the topography of the virtual political public sphere that 'an important issue relates to how computer-mediated-communication (CMC) constitutes people' (Wilhelm 2000, 46). In relation to the online-forums of the City of Tampere, Wilhelm's topography emphasizes, the distribution of information and knowledge as a deliberative material, which the public can utilize in order to form arguments to support their political opinions in a way that builds confidence among citizens (see Wilhelm 2000, 32-33, 90-91). These confidence-inspiring relations aim to create functional model in democratic local community. The model, in which solidarity and intellectual deliberation are respected, are based on effective cooperation. The social contract is therefore to be founded on a moral commitment and admission of legitimacy to reasonable, logical and knowledgeable arguments, which are approved by the majority. The aim of requiring and searching for these types of arguments is to reduce societal uncertainty, for the rationality of political deliberation is seen to produce clear and correct political solutions. The primary aim of reasonable political deliberation is to create an operational model that is communal. Collaboration is politically easier in situations, in which communal values are popularly accepted and individual interests have been left to the background. When democratic communality and unanimity prevail, legitimitation for political decisions is searched for in informative and knowledge-based arguments, which can be concentrated on when political deliberation is not disturbed by individual interests. In general, the theoretical definitions related to participatory democracy, try to advance

this kind of communal politics and, in doing so, they present a desirable functional model for the accumulation of social capital democratic communities.

The online-forums of the City of Tampere are administrational related virtual public spaces, which extend citizen's channels for communication. Zizi Papacharissi points out that 'a new public space is not synonymous with new public sphere' in the sense that 'a virtual space enhances discussion; virtual sphere enhances democracy'. According to Papacharissi, the Internet has not yet been able to transcend from public space to a public virtual sphere, because 'online political discussions are frequently dominated by a few, they have debatable, if any impact on policy-formation' (Papacharissi 2002, 11, 22-23). However, it could be also argued that public spheres can never become visible 'in pure form'. Keane discusses that 'although today's public spheres have a networked, interconnected character, contemporary public spheres have a fractured quality which is not being overcome by some broader trend toward an integrated public sphere' (Keane 2000, 77). Keane's approach to the theory of public sphere differs quite extensively from the habermasian one. He defines a public sphere 'a particular type of spatial relationship between two or more people, usually connected by a certain means communication […], in which non-violent controversies erupt, for a brief or more extended period of time, concerning the power relations operating within their milieu of interaction and/or within the wider milieux of social and political structures within which the disputants are situated' (Keane 2000, 77). By giving these accounts Keane conceptualizes three describing notions of public spheres: *micro-public spheres, meso-public spheres* and *macro-public spheres*. These spheres do not imply 'discrete spaces', but 'rather resemble a modular system of overlapping networks defined by the lack of diffrentiation among spheres' (Keane 2000, 87). Altogether, Keane has illustrated the concepts by the following characteristics:

A) Micro-Public Spheres
- there are dozens, hudreds, or thousands of disputants interacting at the sub-nation state level
- a wide variety of local spaces in which citizens enter into disputes about who does and who ought to get what, when and how
- challenges and changes at the microlevel have necessarily broader macroeffects
- the contestatory relationship between 'imperializing power' and locales
- the micro-public spheres draw their strength from the fact that tey are mostly latent

B) Meso-Public Spheres
- normally comprise millions of people interacting at the level of the nation state framework, may also extend beyond its boundaries
- the spaces of controversy about power that encompass millions of people watching, listening, or reading across vast distances
- although constantly pressured 'from below' by micro-public spheres, meso-public spheres display considerable tenacity

C) Macro-Public Spheres
- normally encompass hundreds of millions and even billions of people enmeshed in disputes at the supranational and global levels of power
- the consequence of the international concentration of mass media firms previously owned and operated at the nation state level
- the Internet stimulates the growth of macro-public spheres: there are citizens who generate controversies with other members of of a farflung 'imagined community' about matters of power and principle

(Keane 2000, 77-84)

When thinking the online-forums of the City of Tampere, especially the Preparation Forum, from the perspective of citizen empowerment, it becomes quite clear that they constitute administrational micro-publics, which does not possess much of the potential, or dialogical spaces, for making new politicizations (rf. Pietilä 2002, 348). It can be argued that online-forums' approach to the construction of environment for political discussion adheres to an assumption of civil sociability. The concept of *civil* signifies, in this context, a kind of erudition and a competente of deliberation, on the basis of which people feel capable of co-operation and of trusting each other. Co-operation and trust engender predictability and certainty about the action and its effects. Politics therefore becomes sociable politics, in which conflicts emerge on the political agenda but in which they are resolved in the harmony composed by civic deliberation (Lappalainen 1999, 56). Today, it appears that administrational, 'empowering', Internet forums have a traditional function of the representative government, which constitutes a policy-conforming political environment in the forums:

> 'Representative goverment must at least seem to be founded on public interests as they are revealed to public life. The days are past when government can be carried on without any pretense of ascertaining the wishes of the governed. In theory, their assent must be secured.' (Dewey 1954 [1927].)

5. Political judgement as precondition for participation

The political deliberations in the online-forums of the City of Tampere can be described as the speakers' subjective performances, directed at a public. The addresses that are delivered in the Internet-forums are not conformed to a reasonable and knowledgeable style of deliberation that is supposed to be facilitated by the forum (except the addresses given by the city officials). The addresses are characterised by subjective, situational judgements about the style and the ways according to which the actor formulates its performance. Hannah Arendt defines situational and temporal polical action, politicking, as a performing art, by which she refers to politicking as action; action that has its own independent existence as a product of acting. The principles that guide political action are formed in an actual political performance (Arendt 1987, 152-153). So political action has always to be understood, at least partly, as a situational and temporal performance, in which political judgements or self-assessments become concrete in the present situation.

On this performative view, political judgement is defined as certain type of action, in which a political actor judges a situation. According to Kari Palonen, in theorizing the concept of political judgement, it has to be noted that political action in itself is based on the criteria that apply to action in contingent situations. He divides politics, on a temporal basis, up into the verbal forms of politicization and politicking, because when politics is viewed as an action, politicization and politicking are displayed as primary performative operations (Palonen 1998, 5-6). In political judgement the focus is on the making of politicizations, which refers to opening new contingent dimension for politicking. Politicking the present is an inseparable part of the politicized horizon of opportunity. The political sphere strengthened by the polity excludes and includes some possible forms of politicization and bars some politicizations from becoming generally accepted policies. As a concept then, political judgement crosses the border space between the conformed and non-conformed spheres of the polity and combines their politicizations with the aspects of the past and the future. Political judgements that are in connexion with the non-conformed sphere are difficult for performative actors, because the constraints formed by the generally accepted sphere are also regarded as general restrictions of politicking. (Palonen 1998, 8-9.)

However, according to Palonen, politicking includes an attribute of transcendency. This is because politicking takes place in the extended moment of the present, in which the already determined formalities do not apply. The momentary separation of politicking creates an opportunity to construct alternative modes of action. (Palonen 1998, 10). Political judgement can attain a reflective form, which critically examines the prevailing hegemony and conctructs alternative discourses (see Forti 1998, 27-28). Political judgement, then, is not merely judgment from the viewpoint of a spectator because there is always an aspect of self-judgement is attached to the action. This means that an actor judges its own position in relation to the political mode of action and to the politicking of the active politicians (Palonen 1998, 10). The performativity of political action means that through the Internet's online-forums citizens have an improved opportunity to make public political judgments and self-assessments of their own. In the Internet these judgements do not need to be policy-conforming because they can get attention and space on the political playground through their alternative performances. The Internet then, offers for citizens a channel through which they can try to take a position in a public political debate. Citizens' political action in these forums is guided by subjective and situational judgement about that performative action according to which they decide to act.

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