

Web 2.0 Interactive : The Rise of Popular Agency and its Impact

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I Introduction

A distinctive shift in the nature of web activity has taken place during the last ten years, as compared with the first decade of the web's deployment. What has been altered between these two periods? Undoubtedly, popular *agency* is rising in a significant way, thanks to the empowering structure of the Internet. But, if the basic web structure has been unaltered since 1990, why talk now about a 'New Web' or 'Web 2.0'? And, what is the point of referring to it with the serial number? Between the 1990s and the current decade, the learning curve of users has improved enormously, while use scope and capacity have been considerably amplified. More users take full advantage of the intrinsically enabling qualities of the Internet, while ingenious new leaps in 'intellectual technology' improve the exploitation of new forms, notably, the file sharing methods. Such tendencies enhance collective interactivity, which compounds further the benefits, but also the risks of the global network society. When combined, these elements are gradually altering both the scenery and the plays set and produced on the virtual domain.

In this paper I analyze conceptually and theoretically the notion of interactivity and subsequently present concrete manifestations of it as these have evolved within the context of web 2.0. I attribute changes in Internet and web use to the pivotal factor of interactivity and project the rise of popular agency on the web as function of enhanced and nuanced conceptions of interactivity. In this vein, I chart distinct levels of interactivity and develop a typology, launching distinguishing criteria through which we can conceive of and appreciate interactivity in a systematic way. These components help explain the reasons for the differences as well as for the gradations observed in web use between the two decades. In presenting characteristic instances of Web 2.0, I discuss their economic and socio-political potential and implications. My concern is to identify observable techno-economic and socio-political trends, while elaborating theoretically also on key political aspects of interactivity and transactivity. Thus, I bring on the research agenda of communications and elaborate on the problematic nature of *governance, per se*, in the digital global domain. Specifically, I highlight the incongruity between representational politics and interactive communication, and critically interrogate formerly trendy notions of cyberdemocracy, and Internet-induced political developments and policies. Finally, I conclude by interrogating observable strategies and default policies, in this domain, and argue that the rise of the role of agency does not at all, automatically, lead to a technology-aided democratic politics.

II An Analytical Framework for Interactivity

Web agency activity and web phenomena more broadly can be usefully projected in the light of original theoretical approaches of communication. Applying Harold Lasswell's famous 'question formula'¹ to traffic of content and to processes on the hyper-medium of the Internet, we observe a total *subversion* between what applied in the *ancien régime* of mass communications media and what prevails today.

¹ This consists in five elementary syntactical components.

1.	WHO	ONE / A FEW	ALL / ANY
2.	SAYS WHAT	EDITED CONTENT	ANYTHING
3.	TO WHOM	MANY	ALL / ANY
4.	VIA WHAT MEDIA	MASS MEDIA	INTERNET-WEB
5.	WITH WHAT EFFECT	??? !!!	!!! ??? !!!

The all – anything – all that we get in the three first replies of the third column above, encompasses the *essence* of the ‘unprecedented’ transformation. Potentially all can say anything to potentially all. Everybody to everybody. This shift imposes a *de facto* predominance of horizontal and full cycle communication², as opposed to linear and vertical communicative processes, obtaining under the *ancien régime* of electronic communications.

This structural framework presupposes then popular communicative participation. Consequently, this framework structure is dependent on mass activation. Put in other words, this newly formed structural framework commands communication and interactivity of the four “AAAA” type: “Anything, Anywhere, Anytime, Anyone” (Doheny-Farina, 1996:113). For instance, near-mass-mediation is feasible over blogs without the controlling power of the usual gatekeepers. However, given the plethora of message-providers and the mounting traffic of contents, among the most taunting problems arising is, firstly, that of *inflation*³ and secondly, that of competition for attracting and maintaining *attention*. The accentuation of such problems is commensurate to increases in numbers of speakers and in content supply. Such content growth leads to *inflation* which impedes or complicates the construction of *legitimacy*, in a world of already massive and proliferating torrents of messages.

The overall interactive network structure, in place, in principle entails that the - *vital for all* - resource of strategic communication, as Edgar Morin would put it, is now made available on the Net, and it is, therefore, largely obtainable. In technologically advanced societies, facilities are available or are, at least closely, at hand, to anybody skillful or accordingly motivated. Along with the maturing of the learning curve, other handicapping difficulties such as the problem of inertia and that of the related technophobia are gradually receding. Due to the digital divide and other constraints, rather than the ‘All-to-All’ model, it is more realistic to refer to ‘communication of the ‘many-to-many’ type’.

Given such a sweeping structural transformation, it would be an act of flippancy not to anticipate or to prepare for major economic and socio-political shifts. The central research and political concern, in Lasswell’s time, was the *type, the scope and the durability of propaganda and ideological effects* that mass communicated messages (one-to-many type) could potentially cause on the many recipients, the mass of citizens.

² The human peers of the Internet are today’s 40-year-olds, while the peers of the web are the 18-year-olds. Roughly speaking, these age groups make up half the world’s population. They are, furthermore, the most dynamic, inventive and most creative sections of society. Yet, this is not the entire picture of Internet demographics. People of all ages use the Internet, yet, the potential of universal access is not nearly realized, so far, due to the various aspects of the Digital Divide, poverty, acute and accentuating economic discrepancies in the ‘global village’.

³ Inflation: I introduce the term of *inflation* synthesizing the term of information with that of inflation in order to highlight attendant problems of entropy.

⁵ Interaction is strongly related to practices of access and participation, implying energetic initiatives and engagement in symbolic or practical exchanges with other participants.

Undoubtedly, the concern about effects becomes ever more acute, in our time, but also ever more complicated, as it evolves within a constellation of multiply interactive networks. This situation is gradually foregrounded, thus, catching general attention. Evidently, this concern is much more acute in conditions of mass-access and mass-dissemination of information. In our time, citizens communicate in a huge variety of ways. Nevertheless, this is bound to grow exponentially, just as it is bound to become more drastic and more impactful. It may also become more rationalized, though this is a matter for multilateral governance and global policy.

As things stand, individuals communicate: [a] with each other in bilateral or multilateral collective exchanges, across frontiers, [b] with commercial market establishments and public or private service providers, [c] with work firms, suppliers or partners and collaborators, [d] with political representatives, leaders and members of the elite. Given such multifacetedness, the research, but also the policy concern here, is what the effect of this new traffic of transactions will be on the Polity and on possibilities for governance more generally.

So, does the accumulated experience of *uses and gratifications* justify an optimistic prognosis about the democratic political developments deriving from ongoing agency role shifts and from the new arrangements in place? The order of changes witnessed encompasses a systemic restructuring. Thus, the socio-political regime *in the making*, comprising Polity changes, is determined by the inherent set of qualities of these new systems, including the condition of flux. In view of this set of transformations and regime changes, one of the most tantalizing issues is the imminent, perhaps definitive impact of such flux on politics and on the economy. Will their future be random or designed?

Within this context, the fact of Internet traffic soaring is neither neutral, nor innocuous. Raising the issue of proactive public policies for harnessing developments on the Internet has been seen either as “normative”, especially so, by anti-statists and anti-interventionists or as futile in the sense of the Internet superseding or eluding territorial state jurisdiction. Neither position is uncontested. Experience shows that normative stances may come to rescue, while the Internet’s elusiveness as regards legality needs to be reconsidered.

Crucial Peculiarities of the Internet

Apart from the revolutionizing feature of *interactivity / transactivity*, at-a-distance there is an array of other features which, in combination, compose the distinctive physiognomy of the Internet: [a] *interactivity / practical transactivity*, [b] *boundlessness / frontierlessness / Ad Infinitum global reach and range/ potentially universal access* [c] *online continuity (real timeliness/timelessness)*, [d] *complexity in structure processing and handling(requiring advanced skills)*, [e] *eccentricity / de-centredness / multi-centricity, lacking of unitary centralization*, [f] *limited simultaneous mass visibility*. The ensemble of these features compose a novel and a tremendously challenging structure, which necessitates, if it does not dictate, the introduction of comprehensive “digital media literacy programmes”. The lack of a concurrent, centralizing visibility in combination with other traits (e.g. the problem of the many-to-one communication), in fact, undermines the catering of classical political communication needs. Hence, the Internet compared to media of the *ancien regime*, encompasses an array of very original key qualities.

The Potential of interactivity

Interactivity is a generic term encompassing several aspects and variations. To capture its key aspects, it is necessary to resort to Systems Theory (Wiener 1949) as the systemic, pivotal concept of *feedback* is the matrix for interactivity. The function of feedback and the formula of ‘two-way communication’ are key structural conditions for implementing any reciprocal interactivity and

exerting of *control*. Interactivity puts access, equality and *symmetry* on the agenda. Moreover, since interactivity, materializes as a symmetric bi-directional relation, structurally it equalizes the roles of all interacting parties (sender - receiver, giver - taker). This entails that in interactive communications, all roles alternate while no privileged roles are locked to unique agents. Hence, roles are dynamic and interchangeable, not set and frozen. (Schultz 2000: 210; Rogers 1995: 314). The noticeable attractiveness of the idea of interactivity derives, undoubtedly, from its inclusiveness, from potentializing equality and *co-creative participation*⁵.

In the virtual domain interactivity “describes the process by which the user exerts control over the form and content of the mediated environment” (Watson & Hill 1997, p. 113). Actual tools or applications or systems incorporating interactivity as an inbuilt trait, provide the best conceptual illumination of it. The extent to which such systems permeate all facets of contemporary life, heralds the advent of a distinctive socio-historical phase⁶.

Levels of Interactivity - Active Versus Passive Information

As communications scholars know, the principle of Freedom of Information as manifest for instance in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, Article 10) has two prongs. In its famous formulation: “to receive and to impart” we distinguish, first, ‘passive information’, that is, mass media reception type of information and, secondly, the prong aiming at ‘active information’. ‘Active information’ is subdivided further in two new prongs: firstly, the active initiative for searching, mining and retrieving information data from all available data banks, sources and environments. The latter form of intervention encompasses a simple level of interactivity and we can, therefore, classify it as ‘level I’. Secondly, it involves the ‘sovereign’ activity of sending, transmitting, circulating of information, ideas, music, images, recipes, beliefs, methods or even commands. This embraces a central, dynamic and extrovert interactive function, formerly the sole prerogative of pivotal and protagonistic media. Therefore, it is classified as ‘interactivity of level II’. What is actually changing in this case is the kind of use to which billions of individuals are putting available media. Thanks to the Web, the world in our epoch is enjoying the complete array of these rights to both *receive and to impart* information. Hence, for the first time in history, all *communication rights* are technically operable, as they are enabled by this new integrated network. Even if we face such a condition as a mere potentiality, it would still constitute a revolution. Finally, thirdly, apart from all forms of enabling symbolic action, through the Internet or synergies thereof with traditional media in our time, people can additionally, interact practically, that is, they can actually transact globally. This *praxial* interactive possibility at-a-distance furnishes yet more distinctive forms of empowerment and of emancipation from the bounds of place. This option involves a far more substantive instance of interactivity, which we can, therefore, classify as ‘interactivity of level III’, that is the most advanced level.

A Typology of Interactive Forms

In the previous section interactivity was classified in terms of levels corresponding to information rights - as formulated in the principle of Freedom of Information – and potential. I highlighted the transactivity aspect which is enabled by all digital applications and networks. In this way interactivity was examined as regards how it changes individuals’ relation to information, as such. The need to chart fully the various forms of interactivity however, necessitates a more

⁶ This same shift gradually obsolesces the long-standing prevalence of television as a mass medium.

systematic elaboration and the developing of a typology⁷. In the typology proposed beneath, I am concerned with sets of new relations, enabled thanks to interactivity, between individuals as community members. This typology is articulated around six binary oppositional couplets, projecting a broad spectrum of interactive instances. Opposition normally hinges around the presence or absence of a certain feature or the occurrence of a trait and its antithesis.

The six binary opposites are the following:

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. | non - mediated | mediated |
| 2. | symbolic | practical |
| 3. | bi-directional | multi-directional |
| 4. | asymmetric | symmetric / partly symmetric |
| 5. | simple | complex [hybrid, fluidly dynamic] |
| 6. | intrinsic [to the medium] | extrinsic [adjunct to the medium] |

Interaction is broadly recognized as “the reciprocal action and communication, verbal or non-verbal between two or more individuals, or two or more social groups” (Watson & Hill 1997, p. 113). A process of interaction can be simple, multiple or complex. The noticeable change consists in that all mediated types of it are encompassed by the Internet, whereas some types are inherent and particularly favoured, as they involve multi-loop to-and-fro circuit processes between interacting 'partners'. A common thread binds and interweaves exchanged messages in the interrelated chains of interactivity. The crucially enabling factor is the degree to which subsequent communication messages transcend the simple response / reaction. It is, thus, interesting to appreciate whether messages go on re-initiating new feedback cycles into yet more rounds of reciprocal communication. This constitutes [a] fuller and [b] superior types of interactivity; the kinds of it which are favoured and undertaken in open-source-environments and settings of the web.

In the first oppositional couple *mediated* interaction is distinguished from *im-mediate*, that is, natural or authentic as opposed to a technically supplied one⁸. It concerns the classical division that the existence of media have brought about.

In the second couple we identify key forms of interaction which now manifest themselves readily, if not equally, in both mediated and non-mediated environments. These are: *symbolic* and *practical interaction*. These categories correspond with different types of practice and power, and, consequently, allow or disallow different forms of empowerment, default of empowering, or forms of exploitation. This second type, then, distinguishes symbolic interaction from its material counterpart. The latter belongs to a revolutionary innovation generated by digital information systems. Such innovative interactivity helps to achieve concrete, practical results: telework and material transactions, rather than, just exchange of immaterial, symbolic contents. Within the options projected by this second pair, we see that network-computer-communication permits a

⁷ Categorization of separate forms of interactivity clarifies what is, what appears to be, and, what is not interactive, in a systematic way. On the basis of different categories we can reach an understanding as to qualities and gradations of interaction. Thus, there emerge softer and more stringent forms of interactivity.

⁸ Here we are concerned with technologically mediated interactivity which is the most pervasive. See Crowley & Mitchell, 1994. For cases of interaction in cyberspace see Trend 2001 and for the implications of the new condition see Poster, 1994 for instance pp. 173-174 & 181-182. Thompson (1994) proposes a distinction between interactive manifestations, the most useful of his notions being that of *quasi-interaction*.

fuller advanced interaction at a distance (than telephones). As a result, we can all interact both symbolically and practically, in ways simulated to those when meeting face to face. Until recently mediated practical interaction was inconceivable. The genesis of telematics has forged these new types of actions and set the ground for new synapses, new ethos, which are already wide-spread and expanding. This is the unique contribution of *computer mediated communication* (CMC) (Kaitatzi-Whitlock 2003)⁹. Practical aspects of mediated transactivity/interactivity permeate and shape modern life for instance with the advent of robots, the smart cards or of cyberspace.

There are countless sorts of practical interaction, comprising anything from ATMs, tele-control tools, sensors, robots substituting human agency, smart cards, etc, through which we perform interactive functions over long distances. Business synergies, such as outsourcing in manufacturing, telework or the role of the 'prosumer' are all manifestations of practical long distance interactions. All these innovations of the last 30 years implement *practical tele-interaction*. Hence, today mediated interactivity, at its best, allows *inter-creativity*: a more advanced collaboration, facilitating novel synapses for synthesis between distant interacting partners. The third categorization comprises bi-directional or multi-directional interaction. The simplest pattern for illustrating a recurring, full cycle interactive communicative process is that of tennis. The ball stands for the message which takes variable twists, angles and turns. The shortcoming of this pattern is that it is limited to two partners only. Singularity on each side is superseded by substituting the game of tennis with such group games as basketball. However, even so, the weakness persists, as the game of interaction is still projected as only a two-sided, but also as a competitive one. In reality, the game may not be competitive, and competition or collaboration may evolve across several axes, as in an orchestral constellation. Indeed, the New web interactive reality is all about a new collaborative and sharing ethos.

The fourth category distinguishes putatively symmetric interactions as opposed to asymmetric ones. We do this by comparing the circumstances under which interaction is undertaken by each partner. For example multilateral dialogues. Two-way communication networks privilege the function of active information handling (selecting or sending) over a passive one (receiving of pre-selected packages). However, here intervene both technical and socio-economic constraints to the deployment of symmetric interactivity. The fifth couple distinguishes interaction that performs just one circuit of communication in contrast to interaction that continues generating further loops of communication, extending in time, in number of circuits (loops) and, thereby also in complexity. A continual array of circuits renders closer and firmer bonds of cooperation, thereby allowing, promulgating and entrenching ground for *inter-creativity*. To distinguish between simple and complex types of interactivity one must check whether, and to what extent, subsequent messages, (a) compound or take into consideration the relevance of earlier messages, and (b) establish either a causal relation or a transformative sequence. Finally, in the sixth couple we distinguish between infrastructures that incorporate processes of interactivity as a *sine qua non* element, thereby securing interactivity inherently, in a 'natural flow'¹⁰. Interactivity is endogenous or intrinsic when provided within the network infrastructure of the communicative system. By contrast, it is exogenous *or* adjunct when achieved through additional, external channel networks such as telephone-grids, mobile phones etc. It is in the nature of horizontal architectural networks (telephony and 'compunication') to be two-way symmetric media. Besides, convergence and digitization grant formerly one-way mass media, new avenues for reciprocity through multimedia synergies. This shift subverts and significantly reshuffles old roles as well as old power relations.

⁹ Reciprocity and voice feedback at a distance between two interlocutors has existed ever since 1876 in telephony. Multi-party mutuality in communication came about one hundred years later, in the 1970s, taking the shape of simultaneous group teleconferencing. All that was still limited to merely symbolic forms of interaction.

¹⁰ These can be contrasted to television networks that must borrow or lease complementary return paths in order to be interactively enabled.

Inherently Interactive Systems versus Mass Media

Technically induced total interactivity (both symbolic and practical), first, materialized with computerized, telematic networks, best exemplified by the web. Full interactivity originates from electronic feedback capacity which grafted digitization onto telecommunications networks. Most crucially, the network architecture of stars allows any-to-any as well as any-to-many communication. Thus, the asteroid network architecture is a precondition of interactivity.

Total interactivity generates revolutionary, subversive, transformations on two levels: firstly, in the shifting relationship between vertical and horizontal patterns of communication, and, secondly, in the novel character of interaction achieved through new media which incorporate inbuilt reciprocity and *transactivity*. This way, the mediatic field is completely transformed through structures and processes of massive *communication*. Such intrinsic structural and functional traits establish full interactivity as an inherent element of new networks. Hence, the process of media convergence had catalytic transmutational effect. Thanks to computerized systems and networks, *interactivity* is both expanding and innovating. In fact, the two notions come to be synonymous. In this way, feedback processes create agency regimes of the four A's [AAAA]: "Anything, Anywhere, Anytime, Anyone" (Doheny-Farina, 1996:113).

III Interesting Manifestations of Web 2.0

"Web 2.0" is just the current name of the condition of realizing and of fully exploiting all types of genial interactivity. There are other names used to describe it, however, it seems that the term web 2.0 has caught on, especially among market people and academics. Alternative names given are the 'New Web' or the "Creative Web" while more advanced types of web such as 'Semantic Web' or 'Web 3.0' are heralded. A short definition of Web 2.0 provides that it involves "new collaborative internet applications". Its key difference from the first phase of WWW consists in greater and fuller user participation, particularly in creating, developing and in managing content, elements which themselves further transform the nature of content. Web 2.0 is thus deep and dynamic, as opposed to a more shallow and static Web 1.0. Roughly speaking, Web 1.0 suggests using the Internet passively, not interactively, as if it were a the vehicle that brings traditional mass media to us. Thus, paradoxically perhaps, even this inherently interactive system is used passively because of not exploiting the full potential of uses offered. That is, not extending beyond accessing and viewing standard mass media content. So, the peculiarity consists in a situation where, even though the system offers a multiplicity of options to self-activate in testing putative self-made applications in a sort of virtual *bricolage*, or the possibility to download similar original ideas proposed by others, nevertheless, due to user insecurity or hesitation, only simple or superficial applications were taken advantage of initially. Even today this 'thin' use is still the case for many users. People read for instance their preferred news paper online. But, this is not quite or properly interactive. It is just shifting geography, while economizing. It is still about passive reception.

Pivotal features of web 2.0 comprise the practice of "really simple syndication (RSS)". RSS and related systems "collect information from selected web pages and blogs, and 'feed' it to a single page, enabling individuals to tailor precisely the content they receive on the Net to match their unique tastes and interests (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006:53). It helps to raise awareness rapidly, or alert about important developments. Thus, RSS is considered as the most "significant advance in the fundamental architecture of the web since early hackers realized that Computer Generated Information (CGI) could be used to create database-backed websites. So, RSS allows someone to link not just to a page, but to subscribe to it, with notification every time the page changes."

(O'Reilly:7). This type of affiliation leads to, the so called, incremental web, to the 'live web'. Typically, RSS is now being used to push both notices of new blog entries and all kinds of data updates" (O'Reilly:7). Overall, such coordinating practices favour and underpin the coming of a novel 'sharing ethos' which is interactivity-generated and bound.

Web 2.0 involves the currently impressive but also contentious phenomenon of the blogosphere, which combines to exploit the benefits of RSS and open source applications. It features the culture of *folksonomy*, a way of jointly appreciating or assessing items of common interest on display, on the web. Rather than categorizing such items in a traditional style, on the basis of kind or ordinal hierarchies, users pick out key evaluative words or signs i.e. tags to attach to favourite items, thereby establishing 'counter-hierarchies' of preference and creating random, *sui generis* 'taste'. It sets its own valuing system, in idiosyncratic ways just as this happens in ordinary youth subcultures. Web 2.0 comprises also 'wikis': formulas and software programmes aiming at sharing knowledge, or applications such as podcasts which render information available even 'on the move'.

Learning Curve

At the basis of the novelty of Web 2.0 interactive is the maturation of individual users' learning curves, but also the compounding of such maturation through the joint efforts and the sharing out practices. This has allowed millions of users to progress and to advance from the position of early adopters to that of successfully experimenting or better still of assertively initiating daring novelties, of becoming creators, but also sharers of novelties. Novelties vary from 'intellectual technology', to social transformation and to superseding of old economic patterns. In this light, most characteristic is the rise of an entrenched trend towards 'demotic', 'open source' and publicly and freely accessible facilities, applications or methods.

The *modus operandi* of such an emergent *shared economy*, embodied in some, if not all of these applications, firstly, challenges or even threatens the interests of certain market players. Secondly, such a novel *modus operandi* implements a gradual shift in the perception of what counts as *use value* and *exchange value*. In that sense, the surging wave of alternative demotic modalities of the Internet-based interactive / transactive culture, may arguably result in challenging the going patterns or model of *consumerist society*. Thirdly, such a divergent, to the going norms, *modus operandi*, cultivates the dynamics of activeness thereby boosting the participatory and the collaborative ethos, rather than then prevalent competitive one. This condition enables all to not just contemplate, but to actually assume the role of agency. And this 'human methodological change' is perhaps the most important legacy to the future of democracy.

Remarkably, the new regime accrues -as if spontaneously- from the transformative power of users themselves. Moreover, such a *transformative power* causes changes extending beyond the immediate action area of users. The positive or negative impact may affect un-related third parties, on formerly powerful industries or communities. Often, the effect is about obsolescing or superseding previously prevalent ways, customs and products.

This entails that new forms, new modalities and progressively, also, new institutions are being shaped and proposed to all, albeit as an unintentional, collateral outcome. Users downloading unpaid for copies of films, or music, even if unintentionally they contribute to demolish the music industry. Their sole original purpose may have been to acquire something for personal use. Yet, the end result of such action trickles down and merges with other types of similarly unintended effects. Thus, further repercussions are observable and future ones are in store. The fact that peer-to-peer exchanges are taking place on a global scale, especially in symbolic goods, reshuffles the terms of entire industries in corresponding fields. The prevalent tendency to establish and entrench sharing and demotic modalities, at such massive scales,

impinges on the proprietary *status quo* and on previously prevalent norms and premises. This demonstrates a power shift originating from the web. Indeed, Web 2.0 has already contributed to some extraordinary experimentations of fully interactive and creative applications. Below is just an indicative list of some of the most distinctive instances of it.

Peer-to-peer file sharing

Peer-to-peer file sharing has come about spontaneously, originally in a small way, by Internet wizards or hackers who aimed to challenge or defy copyright rules. Such teasing and testing has resulted in the now generalized practice of copy-paste and copy-cat file sharing. File sharing is by now so widespread that entire web-based communities are forming around the object of such transactions. In their trendy virtual communities young people started developing transnational bonding through such a 'virtual give and take', that is by exchanging files of music, video photographs, cartoons etc. This is an act of effective piracy, though strictly legally prohibiting use of a personal CD of music in the presence of friends or peers is hard to enforce. However, this type of traffic is now so pervasive that the music and other leisure-time industries are severely damaged, challenged or even threatened with destruction. Part of such a virtual sharing culture involves users exchanging also their own creations: videos, still photographs, portraits, music clips, pieces of news or images of works of art. The objective of this type of cyberculture seems to be to entice appreciation, sympathy, critique or to generate some kind of feed-back. Such feedback embodies, then, a concrete expression upon which bonding may be built in this otherwise virtual, 'absent' and remote framework.

The Case of Kazaa

Following successful litigation against Napster in the USA, file-sharing practices and the illicit downloading of music or video files was provisionally contained. However, tug of war soon came to know another surge as a new and considerably more advanced outlet was invented and supplied. The comparative advantage of Kazaa, as the new software was named, consisted in transferring responsibility for the act of downloading to each individual user. This trait made the innovative software still more resistant to anti-piracy legal curbs. Responsibility for downloading being limited to each individual user, as distinct from being relegated to a central proxy, in effect entailed that copyright-holders would need to sue millions of 'trespassers' across the globe; something seeming like a 'mission impossible'.

The Kazaa super-peer design proved to be "more rugged than other post-Napster file-sharing services." (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006:109) Kazaa started its soaring career by initially handling thousands, then hundreds of thousands, and eventually millions of active users. In the battle between piracy-prone users and the show-biz industry, by the summer of 2002, "the winner was clear. Kazaa had grown larger than Napster at its peak. By early 2004, the Kazaa program had been downloaded more than any other software in history-an astonishing 319 million times." (ibid:109).

This time, the notorious controversy about unauthorized downloading of symbolic goods became a lot more challenging for the industry. This outcome involved also some unprecedented and harsh results as regards legal judgment and jurisprudence. Reflecting the language of innovation economists like Joseph Schumpeter, "Judge Sidney Thomas discussed the potential death (sic) of current recording industry in a whirl of creative destruction. It was argued that 'the introduction of new technology is always disruptive to old markets, particularly to those copyright owners whose works are sold through well-established distribution mechanisms'" (ibid :111).

Peculiar though it seems, in spite of Kazaa being so hugely successful, indeed, the most downloaded software in history, this application failed to make its inventor, Niklas Zenstrom, a wealthy man (ibid: 116). Hence, this very interesting example of *wikinomics* demonstrates a facility combining a set of contentious traits: [a] it contributes to a perfectly demotic agora of sharing all types of symbolic goods illicitly, [b] it damages or contributes to destruction of content rights-holding companies, while [c] not necessarily conferring any material gains to its creator.

Wikipedia

Most if not all people are by now familiar either with the notion or with the service of Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, grounded on the original notion that any user may introduce an entry, which in its turn, may subsequently be edited or supplemented by yet other users. Wikipedia has accurately been described as “a radical experiment in trust” (O’Reilly, :6). For this to be achieved and for the service to keep operating smoothly multilateral and multi-layer advanced interactivity, allowing multiple-loop cycles and synergies, is indispensable. Indeed, this very element, which translates in harnessing collective intelligence, is one of its key attractions and success recipes. This communally co-authored and created encyclopedia, about any entries that participant-users find interesting or relevant, is unprecedented. No wonder that its very existence provokes controversy. Wikipedia has been accused of ‘lacking’ in expert authority in its entries as volunteer authors are not necessarily eminent experts in their respective fields. The issue of expert authority versus fallibility of ordinary lay writers, has been broadly discussed. Here lurks a well-known contention between the erudite and the lay which has a long history. The so called ‘knowledge society’, should perhaps face the challenge of definitively resolving such tensions. A more pressing concern regarding public services like Wikipedia would be to require from and to check its collaborating authors on clearly distinguishing matters of knowledge from matters of opinion. The goal being to avoid risks of conflating knowledge, in the form of *facta*, with evaluation and commentary. This is crucial as the battle of opinion versus knowledge is due to intensify further in the information society. Not only is Wikipedia virtually the creation of its own users, but it is also freely accessed by anybody. Given these traits, it is small wonder that it already ranks among “the top 100 websites” Indeed, certain analysts speculate that it will soon get into the top ten list. Undoubtedly, “this causes a profound change in the dynamics of content creation” (ibid:6) Likewise, modes of content supply are drastically reshuffling, thereby raising both prospects and related concerns.

Information Populism from Google?

In the young market of Search Engines (SE) Google rose rapidly to be the brightest and most familiar search companion as it has entrenched itself as the most popular search engine. Its success story hinges around a popular business concept which makes it irresistible to most, if not all web-surfers and users. Its breakthrough in search, which elevated it to the undisputable market leader, was “PageRank” a method of using the link structure of the web rather than just the characteristics of the document to provide better results.” (O’Reilly: 5). However, Google achieved its distinguished position thanks to a persistently innovating business model (Vise & Malseed, 2005). Apart from its original killer application PageRank, Google had the ingenuity to launch its unique *Ad Sense* policy, aiming to convert its users (customer base) into allies in fetching advertising against remuneration. This virtual type of ‘outsourcing’ was greatly appreciated by users. Such comparative advantage generating tactics overshadow effectively the considerable shortcomings of the Search Engine. As a result the millions of its users seem to disregard the fact

that Google's *PageRank*¹¹ filters out and rejects a considerable amount of information which may be valuable, or even more useful than the findings furnished by its operating algorithm. In purely quantitative terms it is estimated that Google will furnish only about 60-70 % of the total of public entries on the web, out of the technically retrievable pieces of information, on any single demand. Thus, sites which are not considered for selection belong to information rejected by Google's *PageRank*. They are dropped as not worthwhile, because no links are attached to them. So links become *sine qua non*, a very strategic thing to acquire.

Considering all these categories and particularly the subcategories of types of information which are either structurally or agency excluded from being scanned and retrieved, the first inference that can be made is that, only a small fraction of significant information is eventually furnished for the effective benefit of searchers. Hence, there accrues a bias due to the variety of selecting / counteracting factors that have been identified. Here then we get an example of agency falling prey to a successful, yet populist business strategy.

Amazon's Market Concept

Yet another proprietary 'electronic shopping mall' type of establishment, specializing notably in bookselling, on the Internet, Amazon, combines some of the commercial comparative advantages of both Google and of Wikipedia. For instance, in resemblance to the latter, Amazon, invites all its customers to participate in the assessment and in the value ranking of its items on sale, by writing reviews on books or by participating in evaluation polls. Indeed, in this way, Amazon engages in the tactics of cultivating the synergy and the creativity of its clientele, once again harnessing the gifts of advanced interactivity. Concurrently, this same tactic constitutes strategic communication as it constructs the corporate image of reciprocity and responsibility for it. It emphasizes its user-based features and exploits them for further (both book and customer) information aggregation. In this way, the company has developed a unique business model based on making a science of how best to harness user engagement. As a result of this 'mobilizing' and 'energizing' of customers Amazon enjoys a spectacular magnitude, most user reviews and most customer participation. Amazon harnesses such user activity in order to produce better search results, thereby leading "always with 'most popular'". This is an ongoing "real time computation based not only on sales, but other factors that Amazon insiders call the 'flow' around products" (O'Reilly, *ibid*:6).

Blogo Ergo Sum?

Blogs started as diaries which aimed at commenting on news and current affairs. The added value of this novel formula derived from bloggers allowing access to interested readers. This gave forum thereby sparking dialogue and debate, granting vividness or even passionate engagement in discussion of controversial issues. Another characteristic feature was the mutual inter-penetration into each others' sites between bloggers. Overall, these components of openness, of recurring, cyclical feed-back loops in generating and developing real discussions, constitute veritable interactivity-driven exchanges. And these very components gave blogging its distinctive profile and its proactive role in discursively elaborating on important current issues.

Blogging has by now become so fashionable and widespread that it threatens to acquire a critical position, challenging the monopoly of agenda setting by traditional mass media. Blogs

¹¹ There are "over 200 Search Engine Optimization (SEO) factors" that Google uses to rank pages in the Google search results (SERPs). What are the search engine optimization rules? Here is the speculation - educated guesses by SEO webmasters on top webmaster forums. Should anyone wish to achieve a high ranking, the various confirmed and suspected Google Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Rules are can be found in available lists on the web.

challenge mainstream and particularly so embedded journalism, primarily, because bloggers act (more) independently or completely beyond editorial control. Unlike journalists, bloggers are not subject to either self-censorship or to commercial censorship, which increasingly is plaguing journalism of our time. This pathology and the attendant deficit, in proper political communication, enables bloggers to highlight neglected stories or censored cases by media or journalistic mal-practice. Thus, bloggers fill in a genuine gap and serve a necessary or even sobering political-communication role. Altogether this new virtual institution offers socio-political benefits, while promulgating a novel type of hybrid or civic journalism. However, whether or not “grassroots journalists will sidestep major media” (Shapiro, 1999: 57) would be too premature to settle now.

Bloggers also need to fight for attention and for legitimacy building. In so doing, they are subject to the usual constraints of building credibility and good fame. Credibility requires very high standards and research journalism and that does not accrue without considerable material resources. The most successful, i.e. the most visited blogs and those most prominent in references by offline press, play esteemed opinion-leading roles, championing adversarial positions. Already certain bloggers enjoy broad transnational recognition or acknowledgement of pundit positions. However, even though bloggers operate in the ‘frontierless’ global blogosphere, it is interesting to highlight that their pervasiveness does not usually transcend linguistic-cultural boundaries, in any significant way. Telematics wizards, consider that what makes a weblog distinct, when compared to ordinary webs, is the practice of Really Simple Syndication (RSS). Likewise, RSS is the grading criterion of differentiation between web 1.0 and we 2.0. Yet another significant component in the same direction is the so called: *permalink*: the device which turned weblogs into effective conversation platforms of overlapping or interacting communities. Permalink enabled discussion and chat both between bloggers themselves, and between the blogger community and the general web-surfing public.

The *blogosphere* because of its spontaneous deliberative function, but particularly because of its recognizability and relatively high visibility (through prestige creation), has far-reaching implications on the circulation of political information, of original or diverging commentary or of heretic ideas. Implications extend also to introducing and cultivating an alternative ‘ethos’ and new discursive and deliberative ‘habits’, thereby influencing current political culture. Hence, the phenomenon of blogging does not result simply in a function of replicating or multiplying the already existing, news and views. It is more pervasive precisely because it goes, methodologically, beyond the *deja vue*. Blogging would be uninteresting if it only performed an amplifier function. To the contrary, Blogging, like Wikipedia, succeeds in harnessing “collective intelligence as a kind of filter.” (O’Reilly, 8). The impact of blogging on public communication can be measured by the extent of adopting and embracing it. In fact, most newspapers have by now incorporated the blog format on their electronic editions. This is proof of its impact. The same is true of the unavoidable ethos of reciprocity and of opening up of newspapers’ space to citizens’ contributions in terms of both knowledge and opinion. Thus, it is pertinently argued by the proponent of the term ‘Web 2.0, Tim O’Reilly, that “while mainstream media may see individual blogs as competitors, what is really unnerving is that the competition is with the blogosphere as a whole” (ibid:8).

Global Activism

Local, global or ‘glocal’ Internet activism is on the ascendance and it already counts with a few victories, albeit minor, sub-political or indirect. Such successes are manifest mostly in the areas of human rights protection, such as privacy, and safer internet in terms of fighting violence against children, which are endangered by state or corporate enterprises. Indeed, there are concrete positive results accruing in this particularly defensive activist actions. However, there are

not yet any major victories in terms of properly proactive policies or regarding strategy changes. This implies that the scope of power and the political interventionist potential for changes via Internet politics is not fully-blown yet. Nevertheless, there are some certainly famous cases of Internet-based or web-aided movements. The example of Zapatistas is the earliest and perhaps the most striking. The Global Social Forum (GSF), is another certainly more comprehensive and targeting notably global governance issues. The European counterpart of GSF has similarly been quite successful in co-coordinating its action, rising to such prominence and gaining influence, thanks to movement management over the Internet. Among left-oriented groups, *Attac* a poverty combating activist organization is yet another example of a transnationally organized movement operating successfully and orchestrating agency mobilization. By contrast, ultra-right-wing organizations such as Nazi groups seem to best exploit the propaganda and strategic communication potential of the Internet. Overall, the level of internal communication and of political sophistication are aided and enhanced by the inherent elements of interactivity of advanced web applications. Similarly, intra-organizational order, particularly in transnational social movements, is greatly facilitated by such web applications. Thus, NGOs and activist movements tend to readily adopt and harness such facilities.

IV Potential and Limits for Politically Significant Internet

Broadly speaking, what is happening on the Net is thoroughly, arguably even subversively, political. Unprecedented, original, liberating or even radical instances of agency and of participation are amply manifest. But, to what extent, if at all, do such changes result in agency being converted into 'publics of citizens' and able to push toward democratic restructuring? In this section I address, firstly, certain striking paradoxes between the political communication needs in representative political systems and the premises / provisions of the web. Secondly, I launch a critique against notions of cyberdemocracy, arguing that rather than 'the -par excellence-instrumental platform' for democracy, as cyberdemocracy proponents project it, the web may even constitute a ground for escapades and a trap for it. I conclude this section with some references to policy attempts aiming to put some order to the unruly entity: the Internet.

Some analysts are still preoccupied with the issue of whether web 2.0 exists or whether it is just the same as Web 1.0, while others claim that it is nothing but a novel buzzword about an old technology. It is correct that the web itself and its protocols have not been altered, since its genesis in 1990. This, however, is an irrelevant dispute, in the sense that it bypasses the importance of the now observable development of agency-induced procedural and substantive changes on the structure of the web. Put in other words, at issue is not the web *per se*, but the specific drastic, creative, radical and certainly transformative uses of the web, which are, more particularly, connected with the ingenuity of the masses of users in their liaison with one another, in their defying known elite systems or in their creation of brilliant user-centric applications.

A more serious concern is the directly political significance of the emergence of web 2.0. How political and how politically proactive could such Web 2.0 changes become? If the 'New Web' gives rise to powerful, even to transformative movement online, but also offline, this constitutes surely a criterion by which such a crucial new development can be identified, demonstrated and appreciated. But, to whose interest and benefit are all such transformations occurring? Can developments get rational, purposeful and can such a tool serve collective, community goals? What remains open, and, indeed highly contestable, is whether we are entering into New Politics and more specifically into New Direct Democratic Politics. Is web-driven

political and social agency likely to be leading developments or will it in fact, be lead, or even manipulated and exploited by the same old elites and corporate forces?

Put in other words, in what ways is current web-use transforming the scope and the quality of agency? Are the unprecedented prisms and the scale sufficient to make it politically significant or crucial? And how effective and politically interventionist can civic agency actually become? Such issues are still open to speculation. The web, as such, is the technological platform and the *method* which essentially, 'socialized' the Internet rendering it user-friendly, creative and ingenious. The debate, regarding its political usefulness / expediency for participatory or direct democratic projects, started heating up ever since the rise of the populous Internet (in mid-1990s).

Towards a Computer Mediated Democracy?

Two distinct debates prevail as regards the role of the web in politics and current affairs: [1] on political transformations at large due to agency empowering; [2] on the propriety or not of the web, as the platform, for all democratic procedures, that is the useful of the notion of 'cyberdemocracy'.

Given the breathtaking pace of changes in the digital information domain, both skeptics and enthusiasts have plenty of cues for second thoughts and reappraisals. Whether or not "more people will participate is doubtful, but those who do are likely to be better informed" (Davis 1999:114). Besides, those who view the Internet as a populist tool, will realize that "site visitors and participants will already be the politically active, who are seeking more and more information, especially during electoral campaigns." (ibid:114). Participants, from the politically minded minorities, would be the kind of citizens who seek to control, to scrutinize, or to critique. Similarly, on the proactive line the same categories would tend to make legitimate claims and would pursue political will formation over the new media. Interestingly, this is the kind of *control* or *constituency action* that the *inert representative system* does not encourage and would not respond positively to. Typically, this is the kind of control that tends to be silenced, excluded or discredited¹². The question then is why should an undesirable political decision be better or more effectively fought against, if there are more voices supporting it over the Net? This is about actual political dispute and contention. The power of majoritarian public opinion, time and again has been shown to be insufficient and ineffective on specific issues. Why would it be effective if expressed also over the net? Besides, the problem with public opinion and popular pressure, the '*vox populi, vox dei*' effect, is that on the Net opinion tends to be distant and a lot more dispersed, and thus, neutralized. Movement towards more interactivity is growing fast. "But, what type of interactivity? Will users interact with each other, as was true with some sites, or will they interact primarily with the candidate? (Davis, 1999:115). "What will the Web mean for candidates in the future?"¹³ (ibid).

Interestingly, problems will arise either users opt to interact with one another or with candidates. As competition for attention will be growing citizens, rather than attending politicians, preferably perhaps, will tend to establish and exert themselves their own right of expression, for instance through operating a blog, (as entry costs are still minimal). Such an outcome will deteriorate scarcity of attention, thereby resulting in a vicious circle. The crucial question then is: how politically conducive is a condition of the growing scarcity of attention?

¹² The example of big protest rallies, as in the case against launching the war on Iraq, is a case in point.

¹³ "Since the bottom line of serious campaigns is electoral victory, the campaign must assess how much an innovation contributes to that objective." (Davis 1999:114).

In terms of political communication, the 'right to be heard' is paramount, but how can this be satisfied under conditions of proliferating speakers and diminishing available listeners? Which public affair or common interest bind the globally scattered individual speakers? Listeners are all the more on demand, just when 'everybody' from the body politic can become a speaker. Thus, the need to be heard publicly and in common collective forums is not necessarily served via web interactivity, especially not outside or beyond geopolitical frontiers. Political agreement and consent require indispensably both activities – speaking and listening - in qualitative balance.

To examine the second scenario: presuming that citizens want to exploit web facilities so as to get better and more regular contact with their preferred politician over the web, they might run again into an impasse. The scarcity problem is in this case inversed. The 'many-to-one' problematic situation which evolves, accentuates the inadequacy of any single politician to respond to each and everyone of the thousands of her constituency members' messages. This disproportionality becomes more taxing when requested to deal with actual demands citizens file. So, even if we presume that politicians find ingenious ways to respond to many of their voters, how many of them could every politician satisfy, in terms of policy preferences? This impasse puts the celebrated individualism of the Net on its head. Such human disproportionality reveals negative effects when applying web facilities within currently prevailing representative constellations. Indeed, it demonstrates an absolute incongruity between representational political institutions and the surge of interactive skills exerted by citizens on the vertical and the horizontal axes of political communication. "And, perhaps most profoundly, citizens may try to circumvent their elected leaders." (Shapiro, 1999:57) In view of such potential trends the already existing crisis of legitimacy of representative democracies is up for more severe challenges, on the web. Discussions about *post-representational politics* and of such notions as 'cultural' or 'global citizenship' underpin such concerns among politicians and social theorists.

The Scarce Resource of Attention

The problem of scarcity of attention and, hence, the exponentially rising competition for it, in fact, places the problem of post-representational politics at centre stage. Without some form of centralizing of attention, new forms of order and of creating ground for collective political will formation and decision-making, democratic politics faces terminal risk. There is an exponential increase in numbers of sites, numbers of users and volumes of traffic¹⁴, but how can this phenomenal activity be politically structured or harnessed without a politically designed and ingenious type of structure?

The frustration deriving from such a dilemma entails that one must inevitably consider the benefits of both centralizing – hence admitting a certain amount of representational forms – and of simultaneously harnessing the benefits of de-centralized, post-representational forms of agency activity. The latter type of activities and synapses preponderate by far on the Web 2.0 platform. But, a principled Polity is not viable without a three-dimensional structure, that is, without some form of accountable and politically agreed *hierarchy*.

Web Power Automatically Shaping Cyberdemocracy?

Discussions about a healthier and more participatory democracy aided by technology predate the advent of the Internet. The issue of 'direct' or participatory democracy has been a recurring

¹⁴ Fairly fresh statistics are available in Kallinikos (2007), in Tappscots & Williams (2006)' and in Chadwick (2006) but also in the site of ITU .

theme, especially, in the post-war period¹⁵ and several other technologies were likewise targeted. More recently discussions about direct electronic democracy were sparked off and revived with John Perry Barlow's famous Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace. Direct Democracy's ostensible renaissance generated both interest in relevant political debates, but sparked also political passion and social movement towards initiating certain city- or neighbourhood-centred direct democracy projects. One of the issues, then, was whether, methodologically, technology could revive, instigate, enable or enhance political participation. The issue was in effect about a network-computer-mediated democracy, though naming it so, would suggest a blatant technological determinism.

Tambini & Tsagarousianou (1999), Dutton (1992), Kees & Brants (1999) and others followed up and described empirically such techno-social experimentations in various parts in Europe and in the USA. These authors focused on the operational feasibility of such tentative 'regimes' and the possibility of such cyberdemocracies, or 'direct democracies' being generalizable through electronic-public-fora and *agoras* in the Athenian archetype.

Research evidence suggests that even the most successful of those experiments were problematic on many counts or lacked substantial elements, to make them more broadly operational and viable. This is, of course supposing [a] that such an option corresponded to the general will of the public, and, that it did not mobilize only enlightened minorities of enthusiasts. It should of course be stressed, also, that nearly all of such experiments involved just municipal, local government politics and policies. This is significant *per se* for two reasons; [a] local community citizens can actually meet in reality, should they wish to activate themselves political. Besides, direct civic congregations are arguably more appropriate for political discussion and will formation. [b] The power scope for local government politics being almost of a sub-political nature, would not attract broader interest. It does not nearly approximate the crucial high politics of central national or supra-national government or that of corporate strategy.

Thus, since "cyberspace" by its very nature is –potentially- inclusive and enabling, it has been vested with the wish of regenerating democratic politics. But, how realistic is such a desired renaissance? In reality, a *de facto*, political public space, accessible to all members, is lacking. The same applies also to other fundamental prerequisites which combine to counteract direct, participatory electronic democracy. However, democracy cannot inhabit virtual spaces, without degenerating into lightweight or imagined, metaphysical occurrence. So, the primary and indispensable prerequisite is that of a defined state and of a steadfast place.

Power is about controversies, battles and contestations. It therefore, needs present, responsible, accountable citizens, acting of their own free will and pushing aims and issues on the political agenda. Such goals, in their turn, presuppose bonds of powerful and committed collectivities, genuine communities or Polities, if not "nations", ready to constitute their unity and derive strength thereof. However, the exact contrary elements preponderate on the web.

As is very aptly put by Davis (1999:121), "*Direct democracy* has no place for mediating institutions". And it is beyond any doubt that the multimediality of the Internet mediates messages and very uncontrollably so. Since attention will keep getting scarcer and scarcer, this puts us before a crucial dilemma regarding the future of a post-Internet politics. Undoubtedly, people are already drawing multiple advantages from the Internet. However, it is questionable whether individuals can exist as virtual, fluid, quasi- or meta-citizens in a boundless entity such as Cyberspace. Consequently, only under specific circumstances, may the Internet and "cyberspace" contribute to enhancing or reviving democracy. These circumstances are greatly in demand. as yet, there is nothing more democratic, inherent to the Internet, than real life. Indeed, certain scholars

¹⁵ Benjamin Barber, Norberto Bobbio and other authors are among those airing such views which emanated from the perception of the failures of the present representative system.

object to the Internet's positive role for civil society. arguing that not only is the Net incongruent with civil society, but in fact, it favours trends towards "post-civil society" (Breslow, 1997:236-257, Demertzis 2002: 437).

Due to its own peculiarities, discussed above, even under optimal circumstances the Internet cannot host platforms for organizing democratic structure and procedure. This structural inappropriateness is due to six failing key premises through which democratic procedures are guaranteed and implemented. The six criteria are indispensable though, because they are decisive for the fundamental functionality of the democratic system. These criteria embrace: (1) equality, (2) autonomy, (3) non-mediation, (4) definition of scope and field vs. boundlessness, (5) legality / rule abiding, (6) collectivity.

Indeed, instead of *equality* (1) its opposite, inequality prevails. Universal access is unthinkable within the digital divide which highlights precisely such lack of equality of access. Globally only a fraction of world population has access to the Internet. Even in the best provided for information societies, e.g. the USA universality of access, remains a not-realized potential.

Similarly, there can be no question of *autonomy* (2), over the Internet as long as that system is under tight and constant surveillance. In fact, instead of a civil society autonomy we clearly observe hostile or corrosive trends of imposed heteronomy such as violations of privacy, of secrecy and promulgating of dependence, notably by market forces (Chadwick, 2006). Precisely because the Internet is open and unruly, it cannot ever guarantee independence for any of its users. Through the Echelon and other less known surveillance programmes autonomy and secrecy, rather than being guaranteed, are made impossible. By the same token, the Internet can never be the appropriate not to speak of the optimal domain of democratic or radical politics.

Under such circumstances it is self-evident that direct democracy is a contradiction in terms when attached to any mediated platform (3). Most, if not all Internet and web activities are mediated. 'Direct democracy' aspirations as expressed by cyberdemocracy proponents can only be seen just as a literary *metaphor*. As elaborated already, a key trait in the very nature of the Internet is its boundlessness. However, lack of boundaries (4) and infinity, incapacitate any option for order and for constituting principled communities or state regimes. Specific to the Internet is the condition of non-excludability. Such loose, frontierlessness favours the condition of flux. The feature of flux renders constitutional regimes practically unmanageable. Put in other words, 'open systems' make shaky ground for principled communities.

Due to anonymity and to the elusiveness of agency over the Internet illegality (5) is both favoured and thriving. The multiple levels of intermediation which operate on the Internet and its multitudinous users, make it an intrinsic hot-bed for illegality. However, this condition counteracts accountability, which is a *sine qua non* in democracy. It is not coincidental that porn and sexual abuse sites grew by 1500 per cent over the last couple of years (the Press January 2008).

The Internet is the platform for individualized mass. Even though a new web-communitarianism has been spawned, nevertheless it is loose, vulnerable and transient. In fact, the Internet embodies the sociological condition of the 'lonely in the crowd'. Yet, the triumph of individualism and of barren atomization is counterproductive for political community (6). Spaced-out individuals, in segmented environments cannot solidify into communities. Loose and dispersed communities lack the indispensable dynamics and the muscle of a concurrently present collectivity; the premise of *potestas in populo* (Arendt, 1969/1986). Besides, the ambitious entrepreneurs who trade in 'fashionable', 'democratic kits' do not leave any opportunity to be missed. As is aptly pointed out by Lessig (1999 :69):

There are places in AOL where people can gather: there are places where people can go and read messages posted by others. But there is no space where everyone gathers at one

time, or even a space where everyone sooner or later must pass through. there is no public space where you could address all members of AOL. There is no town hall or town meeting where people can complain in public and have their complaints heard by other. There is no space large enough for citizens to create a riot. The owners of AOL, however, can speak to all. Steve Case the “town mayor” writes ‘chatty’ letters to the members. AOL advertises to all its members and can send everyone an email. But only the owners and those they authorize to do so. The rest of the members of the AOL can speak to crowds only where they notice a crowd. And never to crowd greater than twenty three....

That only twenty three people can be in a chat room at once is a choice of the code engineers.

To summarize, the fundamental grounds for the existence and function of participatory and democratic politics, are amply present on the surface, but precluded essentially. The analysis shows that, as things stand, in the domain of the Internet all the contrary conditions, to those required, prevail ! Besides empirical evidence suggests that about three quarters of sites on the Net are irrelevant to politics as such, but interestingly veering on the illegal and the abusive. Hence, agency keeps rising, but to no clearly political end yet.

Internet Governance and Policies about the Internet

Policy making about the Internet can only be meaningful and effective provided that it corresponds to the nature, the scope and the expanse of the medium and the field in question. The very nature of the Internet is global, and seemingly ‘extra-territorial’. This entails that, beyond the national and the specific cultural, Internet action concerns and drastically impacts primarily on global public goods. Similarly, the shape of things entails that such global public goods may be endangered by anarchic, abusive or chaotic trends on the Net. Hence, public policy making and regulation must also have such global character and scope. However, as global public goods are endangered and as global governance and multilateral public policies become urgent, the achievement of them gets increasingly more complex and elusive.

Ever since the adoption of the originating protocols of the Internet, no regulation of this description has been either seriously attempted or materialized. What may be observed are only separately conceived national provisions which often counteract one another. As a consequence, utterly confusing and anarchic tendencies preponderate. But can such premises be allowed to reign over and shape this field? Governments, but also elites more broadly, sit and watch passively as mounting global interactions cause multifarious illegal and illicit actions. Such a *de facto* condition determines necessarily, in its turn, the quality of life and the future of the Internet and of global co-existence. Prevalent ultra-neo-liberal approaches, masked under ‘First Amendment’ sensibilities and considerations have prevailed. Their proponents either refuse obstinately to acknowledge the pragmatics of the ongoing transactivity over the web, or misrecognize it. Either due to a heedless and unethical laissez-faireism, or due to a veritable political inertia and incapacity, the now astronomically voluminous and intricate in its variations transactivity over the Internet remains largely either in legal void or subject to erratic and contradictory national legislations. Consequently, rather than proactive policies and positive prospects, people get entrenched in the tangles of mutually refuting and contradictory national legal and regulatory systems.

Here, then, obtains a barrier of logic between space and place. Goldsmith and Wu discuss the famous court case and the ruling of the Tribunal de Grande Instance against Yahoo’s auction websites, dealing in Nazi-memorabilia, as violating pertinent French law. After a long drawn legal battle and Yahoo’s recalcitrant refusal to conform to foreign court jurisdiction, “on January 2,

2001, Yahoo abruptly surrendered. It pulled all Nazi materials from its auction sites, announcing that 'it will no longer allow items that are associated with groups which promote or glorify hatred and violence, to be listed on any of Yahoo's commerce properties'. " (Goldsmith & Wu 2006: 8). This court case is merely one of the most salient examples illustrating, first, the severe problems of a growing corporate criminal activity, which gets most lucrative precisely on the unregulated Internet, and secondly, the flabbergasting reluctance on the part of governments, but also the most profiteering corporate powers to deal with it collectively. Such mounting criminal activity assumes transnational and global dimensions, hence, it cannot be combated with 'local' remedies.

One of the most contestable, and yet, inconclusive global political processes concerns the objective of Internet Governance by global community, in the form of UN member states. UN agencies such as International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and UNESCO took the initiative for a Global Summit to tackle the thorniest issues of Information Society. Namely, the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) 2003 – 2005, Geneva to Tunis, mobilized enormous human and material resources in terms of governmental, corporate, expert, sponsor and non-governmental organizations' participation. The central theme, of the multilateral talks and procedures undertaken, was Internet Governance and the effective and fair dealing of communication rights. A subsequent *ad hoc* Internet Governance Summit was convened in Athens in 2007, aiming also to negotiate a more fair, transparent and internationally accountable management of the Internet. However, in neither case have any tangible results accrued.

Multilateral controversy around these issues is acute and concerns primarily the control of the Internet which currently is held by agencies residing in the USA. Beneath international diplomatic formalism rages an intense war for the absolute control of the hypermedium, revealing hidden agendas targeting enormous economic, control and propaganda goals. If anything, these summits have served to foreground some of the economic and diplomatic battles underway. Controversies unfold on several axes: [a] among governments of particular UN member states or groups of states, [b] among corporate versus political stake-holders, [c] among civil society activists and NGOs on the one hand and government or corporate agencies on the other hand. Civil society NGOs have been following these steps systematically without, however, achieving any significant role in shaping the future of the Internet. Thus, no concrete policy outcome has been produced in terms of constitutive or legally binding measures for transparency and accountability on the Internet.

Rather than democratizing the structure and the management of the Internet, in fact, contrary trends prevail. Yet, another test case about the negative stances towards civil society representatives was identified in ICANN-related processes in the USA. Civil society representatives were rebuffed when they claimed a decisive role in how best to run the Internet. Tracing the meanders of the ICANN politics - domain name management corporation - Hunter points out that, "the only popular input from Internet users will now come in the form of the At-Large Advisory Committee, which can send one non-voting member to the Board of Directors. The pioneering democratic experiments would appear to be over. Any vestigial remains of citizen participation are now filtered through a corporatist model, [which as some] argue was always planned..." (Hunter in Chadwick, 2006: 251). It would, then, be interesting to project cyberdemocracy fantasies against such a backdrop. This outcome proves plainly that political autonomy on the Net has always been default, but also, and most crucially, that its prospect has been bitterly fought against. Thus, no political power is allowed to civic agency in procedural matters and in shaping cyber-rules. However, given the enormous rise of civic interactivity and agency in content creation and sharing, such endeavours to keep controlling the Internet tightly, more than anything else betray fear of the public on the part of elites.

V Concluding Remarks

In order to harness the power of the Internet for a democratic power shift and a democratic politics, a structured, transparent and accountable involvement of popular / civil agency is conditional. Otherwise, we are simply heading towards a contemporary authoritarianism and a renewed privatization of politics. But, such a prospect can only favour chaotic and abusive trends. The most valuable outcome of web 2.0 interactive and transactive practices is the dynamic rise of social agency and the ethos and the dynamics of participation itself. The ethos of lively synapses of sharing, of actively exchanging and reciprocating news, views, ideas, or items, is a valuable and transformative agent. However, it is inadequate and incapable, per se, to effect democratically indispensable structural changes. In order for multi-stakeholder and fair structures and processes to arise these have to be based on constitutional Polity grounds. No global dimension democratic interactivity can ever materialize or be benefited without due public policies, restructuring the prevailing imbalance of power. The *many-to-one* challenge accruing from the growth of interactive agency on the Net, discussed above, if anything accentuates the crisis of legitimacy of representative democracies. Hence, can democratization ever accrue in default of its increasingly activating citizens?

Ongoing shifts manifest a potential for a double emancipation for users: one interactive on the symbolic-virtual level and one transactive on the practical level. The long term implications of the first, point to political and regime changes, whereas, the effects of the latter gravitate towards changes in the economic paradigm and related synapses. Both impact on present power relations and on socio-economic regimes. Dealing with these challenges with a view to the public interest necessitates intelligent combinations. The manifest tension between centralizing (centripetal) and decentralizing (centrifugal) trends can be resolved only through intelligent complementarities. Reluctance to politically face and deal with structural challenges or incapacity for pertinent global policy can only favour *control* or *power* under chaotic and abusive conditions. Hence, only positive, politically proactive intervention at a global scale can counteract disruptive and abusive regimes. Even if difficult to achieve the democratizing potential exists and can be obtained in web developments.

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