

Virtual Deliberation

An Ethnography of Online Political Discussion in Hungary

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INTRODUCTION

On a hot summer day in June 2006, I was queuing in front of a greengrocer's on Klauzál tér in the VIIth district in Budapest. A woman in her fifties, bespectacled, with short hair dyed a dark brown, and wearing an ankle-length white skirt and a long-sleeved white top despite the heat, had just asked the greengrocer for a kilo of strawberries. "Protekciós epret", said the woman, thereby setting me an impossible task of repeating in English what it was that she wanted. For while 'epret' is easily translated as 'strawberries', there is no English equivalent that would capture the meaning of *protekciós* in its entirety. Dictionary entries list 'patronized', 'backed', 'using back-stair influence', 'pulling strings' to describe the term. But the woman was also trying to request preferential treatment by invoking a practice that had been central to managing everyday life under the decades of soft dictatorship in Hungary. Helping each other out through informal networks, seeking favours in exchange for favours, and in the process bending the rules if necessary was a pervasive way of getting what one wanted – right down to a pound of decent fruit.

The greengrocer, a jovial moustached man also in his fifties, had picked up the customer's meaning, and he replied, "Ma'am, the Kádár era is over. There is no more *protekciós* strawberry". Slightly flustered, the woman hastened to add that she was taking the strawberries to someone who was in hospital, and then, just to be on the safe side, she repeated that the greengrocer should nevertheless add a few *protekciós* strawberries to the bag of fruit he was putting together for her. "If I have nice fruit, everyone gets it", the greengrocer responded. And then he added, "What would Kádár say if he heard what you've just said?" Others in the line picked up the theme and started making jokes about the demise of *protekciós* strawberries and how they too would be glad to get some of those. In the

meantime, the woman paid the greengrocer, grabbed her bag of fruit, and walked away without another word.

This scene at the greengrocer's involved a mundane setting and a banal issue, but the circumstances only highlight the importance of the incident. For a few moments, the market of Klauzál tér was transformed into the forum, a public space where citizens were actively making sense of politics in everyday life. Such flashes of democratic meaning making are pervasive, but they tend to be ignored in academic research in Hungary. They belong to the sphere of everyday life which does not routinely feature in assessments of political participation or the state of democracy.

The appearance of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and especially the internet, holds the promise of extending participatory opportunities to increasingly wide layers of society. In this process, the meaning of the political is also extended to activities and arenas not considered to be politically relevant before. ICTs make everyday political exchanges not only more accessible to citizens, but also more visible to theorists and researchers. It is from these assumptions that the dissertation starts out, and it brings together a diverse set of academic traditions to examine how the mundane exchanges of citizens, as exemplified by the face-to-face scene featuring the strawberries, can become important for democracy.

Democratic theory, internet studies, political communication, and history provide the theoretical background to this inquiry aimed at exploring in depth the daily working of an online Hungarian discussion forum dedicated to politics. In an attempt to bridge the divide between the political and the cultural approaches to communication phenomena, the dissertation also relies on culturalist analysis where it is relevant. Amidst the borrowing, mixture, and hybridity of theories, the dissertation runs the risk of acquiring a stamp of bricolage. However, the arguments throughout the chapters are driven by the conviction, also

born out by the research, that “Discussion is a way of combining information and enlarging the range of arguments. At least in the course of time, the effects of common deliberation seem bound to improve matters” (Rawls 1971) (p. 359).

CHAPTER 1: POLITICAL DISCUSSION IN THEORY, PRACTICE, AND HISTORY

Democratic Theories and Political Discussion

Political discussion is a fact of life. It is a practice that is present in everyday life: citizens either engage in it actively with varying frequency, or at the least they can recognise it and understand it to be an integral part of life under democracy. Conceptualising its role, however, is made more difficult by the competing theoretical frameworks of democracy that rely on different conceptions of human reason, the sphere of the political, citizen participation, or the possibility of articulating the common good. Accordingly, political discussion can at the extremes be dismissed as meaningless and irrelevant, or celebrated as the lifeblood of democracy. The emergence of deliberative theories of democracy, which signalled a ‘communicative turn’ in political thought, seems to have tipped the scales for the latter conception. At the same time, there are competing theories of democracy that continue to inform contemporary debates about political discussion, including the elitist, economic, and participatory models.

The economic approach to political discussion

The elitist theory of democracy (Schumpeter 1950) assumes citizens to be uninformed, politically apathetic, and pathetic in their attempts to discuss politics. Human nature in politics is fundamentally devoid of rationality, says Schumpeter, and this is so not because people are incapable of thinking and acting rationally, but because their lives are so far removed from the reality of national or international policy. Citizens have no direct influence on these realms, which diminishes the responsibility they would develop for courses of action with direct effects on their lives. As a result, “[T]he typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he

would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective” (Schumpeter 1950) (p. 262).

In the absence of rational criticism and the rationalizing influence of personal experience and responsibility, the popular will can only be a manufactured artefact. The techniques of manufacturing the popular will are borrowed from commercial advertising and central to them is the creating of favourable or unfavourable associations whose effectiveness is in reverse proportion to their rationality. Mass participation under such circumstances becomes a threat to political and social stability, and political decision making is best left to competing elites.

While Schumpeter rejects the possibility of citizens’ affirming the common good in a mass democracy, there are two points he makes that are worth emphasising, for they indicate potential bridges to the participatory and deliberative conceptions. One is his acknowledging that there are fields of daily life where rational thought and action are, if not guaranteed, at least possible. These fields would include things that a person can observe directly, thus inducing the kind of responsibility towards them that is conducive to rationality. Family, business, personal acquaintances, and social groups where people are active members would fall into this category. In this sense then Schumpeter reaffirms the importance of associational life or civil society for democracy. Second, he juxtaposes the potential rationality of people in fields where personal, face-to-face contact is the reality-affirming norm with fields like national politics where information is inevitably distributed by mass media (at that time, newspapers and radio). But at the same time Schumpeter also makes the claim that the “psychology of crowds” is not confined to physically agglomerated people, it can be awoken just as easily through the media. And by making this claim, he also opens the door for ideas that communication media can bring together large numbers of geographically scattered people to form a public.

The economic theory of democracy, which counts Schumpeter among its influences, agrees that citizens can be uninformed about public affairs. However, it also claims that ignorance is a rational strategy in highly specialised societies (Downs 1957). The costs of becoming fully informed on political issues far exceed the benefits citizens gain when casting a vote, the impact of which is essentially zero on the outcome. In the social choice approach to democracy, voting is the decisive political act. It is a private act analogous to a market transaction, except that in this case the market is comprised of competing political parties. The goal of politics is to find the optimal compromise between private interests through aggregating individuals' preferences, which preferences are given. The main issue in the social choice approach to democracy then becomes the impossibility of aggregating preferences in a way that satisfies a set of unobjectionable criteria.

While the social choice approach considers preferences to be brought fully shaped to the democratic process, it acknowledges that citizens are not born with a fixed set of likes and dislikes. Preferences are shaped in processes that precede voting, most notably by voters' assessments of the proximity of party political positions to their own. Becoming informed about political issue positions is thus part of the preparation for the casting of the ballot. Utility-maximising people delegate the task of gathering, transmitting and analysing information to others, including government, political parties, the media, and interest groups. The system of political information is thus left mainly to professionals to operate. But the economic theory also includes among the sources of information other private citizens who provide free data in letters, conversations, discussion groups, etc. Political discussion thus has an important role to play in the reception of information, but it is its face-to-face mode that is the most important politically¹, and its importance is instrumental to finding an optimal compromise.

¹ Downs here makes an explicit reference to communication effects research results reported by Katz, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (p.222).

Participatory theories and political discussion

The instrumental view of politics is a core assumption in the economic approach, and it is in marked contrast with participatory theories of democracy that see politics as an end in itself. In the noninstrumental view of politics, engaging in the public realm is equal to the “good life” (Arendt 1958), like it was on the forum in ancient Greece. In contemporary industrial societies, this engaging is best started at local level, in local associations.

Participation in politics transforms and educates participants. It was on the educative ground that John Stuart Mill advocated democracy on a local scale: “We do not learn to read or write, to ride or swim, by being merely told how to do it, but by doing it, so it is only by practising popular government on a limited scale, that the people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger” (Mill 1963) (p. 186). Non-governmental spheres and the workplace provide further grounds for enabling citizens to ‘learn democracy’ in a setting that is relevant to citizens’ everyday concerns, and a participatory society would allow for the generalisation of the positive, educative effects of participation to all lower level authority structures in society (Pateman 1970).

Participatory theories thus extend the political to spheres outside government and the state, which also enables them to see political discussion with fellow citizens in public as an important mechanism in democratic education. Having the self-interested nature of one’s private preferences pointed out by others who are not included in those preferences is guaranteed in public discussion, thus political discussion forces participants to take into account others and widen their horizons to the public interest. However, a serious criticism of how participatory theories conceptualise political discussion raises the issue of the nature of the political. According to this criticism, politics has a practical purpose of making decisions, ultimately with redistributive impact. Political debate thus is about what to do, not about what ought to be the state of society. Discussion in the political realm is “parasitic on decision

making” (Elster 1997) (p. 25), even if it can serve as an independent source of enjoyment elsewhere, but participatory theories fail to account for this.

Discussion and decision making: the deliberative position

Elster (1997) believes that the theory of democracy that can account both for the distinction between the ‘market’ and the ‘forum’ and the inevitability of decision making in politics is the theory of deliberative democracy. Deliberative theories place public discussion in the centre of normative understandings of democracy. They define democracy as “an association whose affairs are governed by the public deliberation of its members” (Cohen 1997) (p. 67). Democracy in this approach is a framework of social and institutional conditions facilitating free discussion among equal citizens, and the authorisation to exercise public power is tied to such discussion. The deliberative view cannot be distinguished simply by its emphasis on discussion, however, or the assumption that political discussion aims at changing the preferences of citizens. Public reasoning, not just discussion is central to deliberative justification. The core of the deliberative democratic ideal holds that in the ideal procedure of political deliberation the aim of participants is to defend and criticise institutions and programmes in terms of considerations others have reason to accept. This way, public deliberation mediates or transforms conflict because it exposes or helps revise objectionable preferences and induces reflection on why preferences are held.

The outcomes of the ideal deliberative procedure are legitimate if they could be the object of free and reasoned agreement among equals. Cohen (1997) sets up four criteria for ideal deliberation. It is free because participants are bound only by the results of and preconditions for deliberation. Nor is the consideration of proposals constrained by the authority of prior norms and requirements. Ideal deliberation is reasoned, that is, participants are required to state their reasons for or against proposals. Issues are settled on the basis of the reasons stated, not on how powerful participants are; decisions are shaped by the ‘force of the

better argument' only. Ideal deliberation also requires that participants be equal. Equality is understood both formally, as the guarantee that each participant can propose and deliberate, each has equal voice in decisions, and substantively, that the existing distribution of power and resources do not shape the chances of contributing to deliberation. Finally, deliberation aims at a rationally motivated consensus. If consensus is not achieved, deliberation can conclude with voting. But the commitment of parties to deliberation to find reasons persuasive to all makes it likely that the outcome of a vote taken after deliberation is different from simple preference aggregation.

Reasoning together to reach a mutually acceptable decision is also a way of handling conflicts about fundamental values, or moral disagreement in democracy (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Acknowledging that moral disagreement is likely to persist in democratic politics, it could still be argued that deliberation can help citizens treat one another with mutual respect as they deal with their disagreements. Essential to this process are the principles of reciprocity, accountability, and publicity. They refer to the kind of reasons that should be given in deliberation, the agents who deliberate, and the forum where the give and take of reasons should occur.

The principle of reciprocity expresses a sense of mutuality that citizens should bring to their deliberation. They should appeal to reasons shared or potentially shared by others, enabling them to mutually respect one another as citizens who share the goal of reaching deliberative agreement. Even if disagreement survives deliberation, citizens who put their moral beliefs to the test of deliberation are encouraged to find aspects of their beliefs that are acceptable to others. Public deliberation thus is not necessarily aimed at consensus. On the other hand, it does contribute to the democratic process by encouraging the cultivation of civic virtues, as participatory theorists would agree.

The principles of publicity and accountability are shaped by the principle of reciprocity. Publicity refers to the phenomenon that moral conflicts in politics are usually played out in a public forum or are intended for dissemination in public. Advocates of the principle claim that publicity operates like a “civilising force of hypocrisy” (Elster 1998). Since pure self-interested preferences do not make acceptable reasons to give others in deliberation, those who have them are forced to find other reasons. Psychologically, a split between preferences held in private and public cannot be upheld indefinitely, hence it is likely that the self-interested position will be converted to what the person advocates under public scrutiny. While the principle of publicity is widely supported (recognisable e.g. in transparency laws and policies), it is not absolute. In some cases – including constitution making (Elster 1998) – secrecy can still be necessary, even conducive for good deliberation². The principle of accountability too becomes problematic if one wants to universalise it. By virtue of having to justify their claims, participants in deliberation are accountable to one another. But in large-scale representative political systems, there is an inevitable gap between citizens and their representatives, and it may not always be clear who gives reasons and to whom.

The deliberative conception of democracy may seem completely alien to actual political systems, and it has been criticised on such grounds (Sanders 1997). However, it is a mistaken approach to simply set abstract theoretical ideals against politics as we know it; such comparisons can only yield the disappointing result that deliberative democracy is at best a fiction. The appeal of ideals, including deliberative ones, is the desire to see them mirrored in social and political institutions (Cohen 1997) that operate under non-ideal conditions. The institutionalisation of deliberative procedures is thus a crucial issue, and one that is perhaps more widespread than critics of deliberation posit. In the following sections, I am going to

² James Madison said about the Constitutional Convention of 1787 that the secrecy with which it was conducted was essential for the results, for in secret debate “the minds of the members were changing and much was to be gained by a yielding and accommodating spirit” (quoted in Abramson, Jeffrey, F. Christopher Arterton, and Gary Orren. 1988. *The Electronic Commonwealth. The Impact Of New Media Technologies On Democratic Politics*. New York: Basic Books., p.77).

take a look at existing arenas for public deliberation. Assessing the deliberative in politics is the purpose of this exercise, aided by the method of relying on general principles and considered judgements about particular circumstances, “successively modifying each in light of an appraisal of the other” (Gutmann and Thompson 1996).

Arenas of deliberation

The deliberative position assigns political discussion a central role in the democratic process. It is unclear, however, how widespread deliberative discussion practices are, or how the citizens engaged in them make sense of it. Arguably, deliberative engagement with others is more widely practiced than it is realised. If the definition of what constitutes deliberation moves away from the rigid logic of ideal procedure, areas and practices hitherto dismissed open up for interpretations as deliberative arenas. Deliberative potential can occur in any situation where citizens engage in political discussion precisely through the act of their engaging in such an exercise, for engaging in political discussion implies mutual recognition by participants who indicate that they acknowledge each other to be partners for the discussion.

Viewed from this perspective, deliberation is already more common in public life than is routinely presumed (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Jury deliberations are an integral part of the legal system – at least in some countries –, and research suggests that citizens who serve on a jury that deliberates successfully, i.e. reaches a verdict, become more politically engaged subsequently (Gastil, Deess, and Weiser 2002). Furthermore, when issues are discussed in Parliament or Congress, it is often possible to detect elements of deliberation in the arguments, for moral claims appear when values are explicitly mentioned in the justification of preferred policies. Some would argue that such deliberations among political representatives and experts suffice for a healthy democracy (Bessette 1994). If, as the social

choice theories of democracy claim, democratic voting and discussion are chaotic, arbitrary, meaningless, and impossible, then we are best protected from the absurdity of results by institutions that shunt decisions from the incoherent democratic forum. Elite deliberations also have the additional benefit of preventing outbursts of spontaneous or passionate judgement by the crowds. But such elitist positions are based on an aggregative conception of democracy, and they are becoming the exception, not the norm. Instead, the knowledge and lay expertise of citizens are seen increasingly as a resource that could enhance the quality of political decision making.³

Deliberative experiments across the world

Deliberative forums seem like an ideal venue for tapping into the resource of lay expertise in a way that makes its input meaningful and rigorous. In a 'renaissance' of public deliberation, thousands of local and national deliberative forums have been organised in recent years in the US and Europe. Nor has the wave of participatory projects been limited to developed countries: neighbourhood-based deliberation was one of the crucial elements in participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and Ipatinga, Brazil (Baiocchi 2001; Oliveira, Vaz, and Carty 2003), Bulgaria, Hungary, and China ran deliberative polls, while Panchayat reforms in West Bengal and Kerala in India created new democratic channels that devolve administrative and fiscal power to villages (Fung and Wright 2001). The names, design details, issue areas, and scope of such initiatives vary. But citizen consensus councils, consensus conferences, wisdom councils, citizen deliberative councils, citizen juries, planning cells, civil grand juries, and deliberative polls all aim at increasing the levels of citizen participation in politics.

³ For example, the Western Australian Government declares that it "strongly promotes increased community involvement in decision making. Involving the public is a 'must do' activity in Western Australia, as it is across the world" 2003. Consulting Citizens: Planning for Success. Perth: Government of Western Australia, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Citizens and Civics Unit. Similarly, the Power Inquiry report from the UK says that the crucial step in the effort to re-engage citizens is "the introduction of institutional and cultural changes which place a new emphasis on the requirement that policy and decision making includes rigorous and meaningful input from 'ordinary' citizens" (2006. Power to the People: An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy. London: The POWER Inquiry.) (p.58).

Explicitly or implicitly, principles of deliberation inform the organisation of these events. One of the defining characteristics of citizen consensus councils for instance is the diversity of citizens who are brought together. Because they are diverse (in terms of their background, experiences, demographics etc.), participants have to “go deeper in order to find the common ground underlying their differences”. Discussion with others broadens individual perspectives, and when such broadening occurs, “dramatic leaps of creativity” can happen until the group finds mutually satisfying alternatives. The results the council produces must then be reported to the “larger population”. The requirement of finding a common ground reflects the principle of reciprocity without making a direct reference to it, while the need to report back to the public captures the principles of both publicity and accountability. It is also made clear at the outset that citizen consensus councils must be free of outside bias or special interest influence. On the other hand, the leaps of creativity celebrated in the councils’ deliberations indicate a non-rational approach. Indeed, the consensus that emerges from this process is understood to be closer to the ‘true’ meaning of the word: closer to the Latin *consentire*, to “sense or feel together” (Co-Intelligence 1999).

This is a curious proposition for evaluating the outcome of deliberative experiments, one that acknowledges a rationally motivated consensus emerging from deliberation to be a utopian expectation. The same conclusion is supported by research on face-to-face, formal settings where selected individuals were brought together with the expressed aim of deliberating on select issues: the inequalities people bring to deliberation could be reproduced, and the ideological polarisation of participants actually increased (Button and Mattson 1999; Gastil and Dillard 1999; Mendelberg 2002; Mendelberg and Oleske 2000; Merkle 1996). These findings could be interpreted as questioning the feasibility of deliberation as a way of political decision making, for if deliberation fails to produce consensus, decisions have to be made through other means like voting. Consensus, however, does not have to be a necessary

requirement for good deliberation. In large pluralistic societies, it is possible that discussion increases the diversity of opinions instead of driving discussion partners towards agreement on political matters. Public discussion then can work as a process of trial and error for excluding forms of ignorance, a useful process for individuals and society but one that can actually increase the amount of disagreement in the community (Christiano 1997). What matters in deliberative arenas is that even where the opinions of participants do not converge on a shared position, their “dissensus” becomes informed.

Another type of objection made to deliberative forums claims that lay people lack sufficient information and, partly as a consequence of their ignorance, are incapable of making rational judgement on complex policy issues. The forums organised for deliberation tackle this issue by making sure participants are briefed properly prior to their deliberations. Detailed information on the issue are distributed to them in booklets, and experts are invited to advise participants and/or respond to their questions. Experience suggests that as a result of their deliberations, the political knowledge of citizens increases significantly, and they are capable of managing even the most complex policy issues. Consensus conferences have been organised about science and technology, including biotechnology in Denmark or newly emerging telecommunications systems in the US (Guston 1999; Sclove 1995). The issues covered in deliberative polls have included the future of the national health care system in Britain, electric utility in Texas, the introduction of the single European currency in Denmark, or aboriginal reconciliation in Australia. These are highly complex and technical matters, but participants managed to cope with them.

Evaluating the outcome of deliberative forums is made difficult precisely by the divergent and multiple understandings of the concept of deliberation and its requirements⁴.

⁴ This is said to be why Deliberative Poll® is a registered trademark, and probably why Citizens Jury® is protected in the same way, although both initiatives are run by nonprofit, nonpartisan institutes. Trademark registration is supposed to be a quality seal that ensures no inadequately executed (and botched) deliberative experiment can call itself Deliberative Poll®, as James Fishkin explained at a Budapest lecture in 2005.

The significance of results can be interpreted in different ways, depending on which set of criteria is used (Rowe and Frewer 2000). In their review of the empirical literature on public deliberation, Delli Carpini et al. draw tentative conclusions from the research done so far (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004). The literature on small group deliberation supports a number of the claims about the benefits of deliberation, and the same results are also held up by other research directed specifically at democratic, political versions of deliberation. Most importantly, the review concludes that the impact of deliberation and engagement in political discussion is “highly context dependent” (p. 336), varying with the purpose, the subject matter, the participants, the rules governing interaction, the information available to participants, or prior beliefs.

Deliberation unbound

The impact of deliberation is also influenced by its connection to authoritative decision makers (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004). The issue of whether deliberation needs to be aimed at influencing decision making, that is the selection of public officials and/or the policy decisions elites make, is probably responsible for much of the confusion and contradictions in the uses of the term. By distinguishing between deliberation and other forms of “discursive participation”, Delli Carpini et al. concede this point, also made in Elster’s claim about political discussion being “parasitic” on decision making. Of course, deliberative experiments are organised in a way that overcomes many of the barriers that can ordinarily prevent political participation. Deliberations occur in small groups, and the reduction in size in itself increases the impact of the individual on the outcome from practically zero to something measurably significant. By usually involving decision makers, the deliberative event can also provide a special incentive to become informed about the issue on the agenda. All of this can make organised deliberative forums seem artificial creations, good perhaps for modelling what would happen under more ideal circumstances but not having much in

common with how liberal democracies work. On the other hand, these forums are an elegant way of including participatory, deliberative mechanisms in the institutions of representative democracy.

The distinction between formally structured political will-formation and the surrounding environment of “unstructured processes of opinion-formation” is also made by Habermas (1997). The theory of the public sphere recognises the importance of “spontaneous, unsubverted circuits of communication (...) not programmed to reach decisions and thus (...) not organised”. The intermeshing of autonomous public spheres allow a communication network to emerge, with voluntary associations its nodal points. Associations specialise in “discovering issues relevant for all of society, contributing possible solutions to problems, interpreting values, producing good reasons, and invalidating others” (Habermas 1997). Thus they are effective indirectly, their value being instrumental in informing institutionalised political decision making.

The communicative mechanisms described by Habermas are also present in deliberative theories, with the important addition that the scope of public reason is increasingly widened. Grassroots organisations, professional associations, sports associations, shareholders meetings, schools, and citizens’ hospital committees alike become included in the concept of public forum (Gutmann and Thompson 1996), while a more radical suggestion proposes to widen the scope further to include interest groups, the media, and everyday talk (Mansbridge 1999).

Media, participation, and deliberation

The relation between the media and deliberative democratic initiatives has been ambiguous. Deliberative theorists pay little attention to the media, but when they do so, it is usually from a ‘malaise’ perspective (Gambetta 1998; Gutmann 2004; Page 1996). This perspective states that mass media are unable to foster deliberative democracy because their

audience-maximising drive creates incentives for finding the ‘lowest common denominator’ in their programmes; in the ‘race to the bottom’, they provide easy gratification and passive entertainment that reduces complex public issues to over-simplified presentation; and they tend to exclude discussions of fundamental values and reasons for holding various positions. In a more nuanced treatment of the issue of media and deliberative democracy, Bohman sees many new influences on democracy the result of “the cognitive and communicative division of labor that are inevitable structural consequences of technology, media, and expertise” (Bohman 2000) (p. 47).

These views are also shared by scholars of media studies or political communication (Page 1996). Those traditions argue that politicians employ increasingly professional teams that are believed to be able to win them the elections - this is referred to as the “scientification of politics” (Swanson and Mancini 1996). Scientification is an aspect of the evolution of an increasingly demanding and professionalised system of public communication. The demands of the new environment of public communication drive US network news to adopt a style of fast-paced, dynamic reporting. The high-speed communication techniques further perfect the information structure of democratic societies, but they tend to do so at the expense of an inclusion of the public. The media emerge as an “autonomous power centre” (Swanson and Mancini 1996) (p. 11) of democracy. Increasingly professionalised media systems may bring their own agendas into public communication, which they try to communicate to the public after negotiating with other power centres. The cooperation and rivalry between the professional machineries of the media and politics or the government becomes a defining feature of modern democracy, inducing a “crisis of public communication” (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995).

Despite the bleak assessments, deliberative initiatives have repeatedly relied on the media to disseminate their results to the polity at large. While small group discussions in

deliberative polls are modelled on the face-to-face assemblies and town meetings, the media were enlisted to broadcast the events. Britain's Channel4, the US Public Broadcasting Service, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Denmark's DR, and Bulgaria's BTV were among the channels that cooperated in the deliberative polls. The fact that these channels are public service broadcasters seems to confirm Cohen's (1997) assertion that deliberative arenas are public goods and ought to be supported with public money to express the basic commitment of a democratic order to deliberation⁵.

Attempts to open up the process of professional communication also came from within the journalistic profession, in the public or civic journalism movement. Regardless of how successful the movement proved to be, its expectation that the press "recognise its role in fostering public participation and public debate", making it a medium of disseminating information as well as a medium through which citizens can "discover their common values and shared interests" (Glasser and Craft 1998) (p. 205) is consistent with deliberative democratic initiatives. The programmatic call for a "journalism of conversation", however, could not provide a satisfactory answer to the challenge of expertise, and the movement has been heavily criticised on these grounds.

The public journalism movement tried to introduce public participation mechanisms in the newsrooms of privately owned and commercially operated media outlets. Other signs indicate further that commercial media have not been immune to the communicative participatory wave affecting public thinking about democracy. The participatory features of call-in talk shows made some researchers declare them venues for listeners and viewers to be 'politically energised' through the "opinion activity" of public discussion (Pan and Kosicki 1997). The runaway success of direct audience involvement in hit television programmes like reality shows or Pop Idol even prompted some rethinking of the ways of political

⁵ Cohen states this in relation to the public funding of political parties, but his argument can be extended to other arenas, including the media.

representation and participation in public life (Coleman 2003). This line of thought introduces elements of popular culture as worthy areas of political inquiry, a controversial move⁶ but one that is actually not inconsistent with deliberative democratic theory. As the deliberative conception construes politics as aiming at the formation of preferences, not just their aggregation, it posits no bright line between political speech and other forms of expression (Cohen 1997). Thus in principle it is possible to understand cultural phenomena as directly relevant for politics. Television talk shows have been analysed precisely along the lines of what role they play in the public sphere, and they were found to bring into the public arena the subjects of formerly private conversations (Livingstone and Lunt 1994), rhetorical contest (Liebes 1999), and emotions (Lunt and Stenner 2005). The inclusion of popular cultural programmes in inquiries of democracy can also be justified on the grounds that they are products of the media, and in the world of mediated politics the media are an integral part of public communication.

Everyday talk as participation

The same justification, however, would not hold for everyday talk that seems equally or more distant from the ideas of deliberativeness. From a traditional perspective, it is questionable whether everyday talk can be considered a form of political participation at all, as it falls outside the scope of standard definitions that construe participation as taking part in the process of the formulation, passage, and implementation of public policies (Parry, Moyser, and Day 1992)⁷. It is equally questionable what model of communication applies to everyday political talk. 'Talk', 'discussion', and 'conversation' are used, sometimes interchangeably, to describe people exchanging information and opinions about political

⁶ More precisely, such a move could be considered controversial for political science or democratic theory, but not for other areas of social inquiry like cultural or media studies.

⁷ Voting at elections or referenda fall into this category, along with much less widespread practices like attending party meetings, taking part in informal or organised groups related to politics, or contacting representatives. A broader understanding of participation would also incorporate activities of citizens' informing themselves about public affairs. Informing oneself is instrumental to the narrower definition of participation, but it has such important consequences for how participation as decision making is carried out that it can legitimately be included in the definition Budge, Ian. 1996. *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press..

issues in the public sphere. But while ‘deliberation’ has a set of standards and criteria that define the term, the same cannot be said for the terms indicating more informal exchanges.

Models of talk

Traditional political and social thought generally failed to deem everyday talk significant enough to merit theorising or systematic enquiry. Talk was a ‘natural’ part of everyday life, its pervasiveness rendering it invisible, on top of being irrelevant for the responsible, enlightened, and able sphere of political decision making. In classical rhetorics, conversation as a genre was recognised but paid little attention to (Remer 1999). Cicero’s writings contrast conversation with oratory, that is public judicial or deliberative speech employed in courts of law, public assemblies or the senate. Unlike such forms of rhetoric, conversation was to be found in social groups, philosophical discussions, or among gatherings of friends. Conversation was not directed to specific actions and immediate matters, it was used in small, exclusive circles. Tied to the condition of leisure, it was unhurried, and its subjects could be mulled over without the pressure of making immediate decisions. And because conversation was speech among a select group, it was serene and restrained, free of destructive passions like “distress and fear” or “extravagant joy and lust” that would conflict with deliberation and reason. At the same time, emotions of a “constructive” kind, including devotion, the desire for truth, or the urge for fellowship or at least good will between partners were welcome to enter conversations whose purpose was to collectively seek out the truth.

From Cicero’s perspective, conversation cannot be the main genre for politics because political speech is public, addressing large audiences, and because conversation is not directed to action in a way necessary for politics (which depends on action). Publicness and the orientation towards specific results are also among the features along which Michael Schudson differentiates models of conversation (Schudson 1997). Schudson argues that there are two distinct ideals of conversation: the sociable model and the problem-solving model. In

the sociable model, conversation can be non-utilitarian, it does not have to have an end outside itself. Conversation of this kind is oriented to the pleasure of interacting with others without the necessity of persuasion. In sociable conversation, the emphasis is on cultivation and sensibility, the development of capacities for fresh, entertaining, responsive talk, which affords aesthetic pleasure to participants. Sociable talk is an interactive engagement, it acquires the quality of a “rich game” like chess, where there are a number of constraints on the possible moves but little predictability of the outcome. On the other hand, the problem-solving model of conversation starts out from the premise that talk is justified by its practical relationship to the articulation of common ends. The focus here is on arguments declaring what the world is and should be like. Problem-solving conversation works as a model of good government, expecting reasonableness from participants in their willingness to listen to others, state their own views, and revise statements in the light of the responses.

The two types of conversation, says Schudson, are necessary for democracy in radically different ways. The sociable model involves homogeneous conversation, where people talk primarily with others who share their values. The shared assumptions make the testing of opinions and ideas “safe”, free from severe conflict, so participants are likely to be reinforced in their shared views. In problem-solving conversations, heterogeneity is the norm. Talk occurs among people who do not share the same views, therefore a friendly testing of ideas is not possible. Uncertainty and doubt are penalised, conviction and certainty are rewarded, but amidst hostile emotions there is still the possibility of exhilaration in coming to an agreement in the face of heterogeneity. This is the “truly public” mode of conversation, and it takes in place in settings where talk is bound to be uncomfortable, threatening to the point where formal or informal rules of engagement are required.

Everyday talk in the deliberative system

Everyday talk is certainly not always self-conscious, reflective or considered. But it is a crucial part of the full deliberative system, because it is through everyday talk that people come to understand themselves and their environment better, and it helps participants change in ways that are better for them and the larger polity (Mansbridge 1999). The full deliberative system is made up of an interrelation of its parts, including public forums, activists, associations, but also formerly private spaces like the home or the workplace. All parts of this system can be judged by the same standards, regardless of the presence or absence of decision making, because that difference is “not significant for judging the quality of the deliberation for democratic purposes” (Mansbridge 1999) (p. 212).

Consequently, everyday talk can be judged for its publicity, accountability, and reciprocity; freedom, equality, accuracy in revealing interests, as well as the transformative capacity. The standards, however, should be loosened up for the more informal character of the non-government parts of the deliberative system. Publicity in relation to everyday talk should not be made a fetish, as sometimes secrecy can produce better deliberation by helping creativity thrive. Accountability too must be interpreted broadly in the whole deliberative system, with full accountability entering the process not at its creative early stages but later, when it becomes most public. Reciprocity, or mutual respect, consistency of speech and action, and the need to acknowledge the strongly held beliefs of others applies unproblematically to everyday talk. The repertoire of arguments is fairly broad at the early stages of the deliberative process: it can include testimony, that is stating one’s views in one’s own words; greeting and rhetoric, where greeting offers an explicit recognition of the other and rhetoric uses forms of speaking like humour that reflexively attends to the audience; and storytelling that shows what values mean to the persons who hold them. Everyday talk should also be free from the threat of sanction or the use of force. Equality is to be understood not as a requirement for each participant to have an equal effect on the outcome of deliberation,

rather than the 'force of the better argument' should prevail regardless of with whom it originates. The standard of public reason on the other hand needs to be enlarged in the context of everyday talk to include a "considered" mixture of emotions and reason.

The loosened up standards are to be applied with a view to the whole deliberative system that encompasses a continuum from everyday talk to the public decision making assembly. Thus it becomes possible to accommodate nondeliberative expression into the theory. Mansbridge uses an example of 'everyday activism' to show how this accommodation can work. If a woman calls her husband a 'male chauvinist', she hurls an epithet in anger, out of the context of mutual respect, empathy and listening, far from articulated, humane deliberation. The same utterance, however, can be read as an implicit claim to justice, a crude and shorthand form of trying to persuade the other not to act on the basis of a contested ideal of human interaction. In a similar way, activist groups can "stir the intellectual and emotional pot" (p. 220) by developing their ideas, often extreme ones, in their enclaves. Their collective anger is often stoked in the process of trying to find solutions to collective problems, but the anger can serve the useful purpose of helping to remove the apathy induced by a sense of powerlessness. Once the ideas get out of the protected enclaves to the more public arenas of the deliberative system, they are picked up, tried, adopted or dropped. If the deliberative system works well, it filters out and discards the worst ideas on public matters, and adopts, applies the best ones.

Everyday talk, as Mansbridge argues, can serve two important purposes. In their response to Mansbridge, Gutmann and Thompson (1999) agree that it can challenge conventional assumptions of everyday life, like the ones about the subordinate role of women or some minorities. It can also contribute to conventional political deliberation directly or indirectly, for instance by enabling social movements to encourage new kinds of everyday talk that challenge and help change conventional politics. A deliberative political system

works best when it is not experienced by citizens as an alien world, therefore some substantial continuity between everyday talk and political talk is desirable. Nevertheless, talk that aims at reaching binding decisions and talk that aims at influencing private relationships should still be distinguished, also because the distinction can help make sense of the interaction between the private and public spheres (Gutmann and Thompson 1999).

Empirical findings on everyday talk

Despite the conflicting appraisals of the significance of political conversation in democratic participation and deliberation, the resurgence of theoretical interest had the benefit of inspiring a wave of empirical research into everyday talk (Bennett, Flickinger, and Rhine 2000; Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2002; Kim, Wyatt, and Katz 1999; Mansbridge 1983; Mansbridge 1999; Wyatt, Katz, and Kim 2000). Although there is still a “scarcity of empirical evidence” (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004), there are now more data available about who engages in political discussion, with whom, where, and with what effect. A rather sceptical assessment of everyday political discussions in America concluded that citizens tend to avoid political subjects in their daily exchanges, producing apathy in everyday life (Eliasoph 1998). On the other hand, the conclusions of Delli Carpini et al.’s review of empirical literature on public deliberation refute claims about general political apathy; Americans engage in public discussion with enough frequency to warrant a deeper understanding of its role in democracy (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004).

In a comparative analysis of political talk in Britain and the United States from the late 1950s to the early 1990s, Bennett et al. reported relatively little change in the frequency of engaging in political conversation. Most respondents in both countries had at least some experience with political discussion, although citizens usually talked about public affairs “only sporadically”. The group most likely to report talking about politics frequently in both

Britain and America were wealthy, better educated males extremely interested in public affairs (Bennett, Flickinger, and Rhine 2000). This is supported by Conover et al.'s research on political discussion in the US and the UK that found women, the old, and the poor consistently underrepresented among high discussants (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002).

The groups studied in Eliasoph's participant observation were less and less inclined to engage in "public-spirited political conversation"⁸ the more public the setting was. Other research confirms Eliasoph's conclusion that political conversations occur mainly in private settings. Talk on political issues was reported to occur most in respondents' homes and the homes of their family and friends, followed by work (Bennett, Flickinger, and Rhine 2000; Coleman 2003; Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002; McLeod et al. 1999; Wyatt, Katz, and Kim 2000). The primacy of an intimate, familiar setting for political discussion seems to confirm that people prefer sociable conversation with a safe ground for testing ideas among like-minded discussion partners (Bennett, Flickinger, and Rhine 2000). But political participation can be more strongly encouraged by discussion networks where differences of opinion reign. Network heterogeneity is positively related to political participation like voting, contacting a public official, circulating a petition or volunteering for a campaign. It also has a direct influence on participation in a deliberative forum (McLeod et al. 1999).

However, there is evidence that friendliness among discussion partners does not exclude a diversity of views. Based on data gathered during the 1996 presidential campaign in the US, Huckfeldt et al. concluded that most citizens are exposed in their networks of communication to heterogeneous messages. Political communication was found to occur among people who disagreed with each other, and their disagreement tended to survive discussion. In a reversal of Schudson's prediction for a 'truly public' conversation, the personal relationships of discussion partners managed to last regardless of the heterogeneity

⁸ Public-spirited conversation here refers to talk that is open to debate and oriented to questions of the common good (p.16).

of their political views. This is possible because the discussions among friends enable them to comprehend each other's reasons for holding different views: "You may not like your best friend's politics, but the disagreement is frequently tolerable, in large part because you are able to understand the motivation behind her opinions" (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2002) (p. 19-20). In other words, citizens can apply reciprocity in their everyday political talk by showing mutual respect and acknowledging the strongly held beliefs of others. The same conclusion is further supported by research on political discussions at the workplace. Mutz and Mondak found that the workplace offers greater exposure to diverse political opinions, such exposure increases people's knowledge of the others' rationales for holding views different from their own, and it fosters political tolerance (Mutz and Mondak 2006). The optimistic overtones of these results on discussion and disagreement are also echoed in the findings of research on 'argument repertoire'. Price et al. found that exposure to disagreement can make opinions more deliberative: it serves as an incentive for people to generate reasons for their opinions and for the reasons why others may disagree with them (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002). Similarly, political participation has been linked to how attentively and frequently people engage in political discussion with others: the more frequently and more attentively people discuss politics, the better they can handle the diversity of views, and the less discouraged they are to be mobilised (Kwak et al. 2005).

The positive effect of improvements in opinion quality, however, does not resolve the dilemma that political disagreement may create tensions that induce people to avoid discussion with whom they disagree. Self-censorship is a rational option in politically heterogeneous communication networks, but the compulsion of those who are politically engaged can help them overcome the barriers. The politically engaged use more news media, and engage in more political participation of the 'campaigning' kind (voting, volunteering for a political campaign, participating in public meetings, contacting elected officials). They also

report higher levels of political conversation in daily life (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz 1999). This destines them to encounter more disagreement and argumentation, but they continue to be drawn into discussion, like “moths to the flame” (Huckfeldt and Mendez 2005). In other words, everyday activists can be relied on to sustain the vitality of public discussion among citizens.

Another line of enquiry into political discussion chose to look at the private settings in which most political conversation occurs. This approach concludes that talk about public concerns has political consequences, even if it is conducted in the privacy of the home or among family and friends (Wyatt, Katz, and Kim 2000). Ordinary conversations about political issues too are significantly correlated with opinion quality and political participation. The fact that these conversations occur mostly in the home could be interpreted as an indication of the home being an integral part of the public sphere, with the media bringing the external world to the living room. This is the Habermasian position of private people getting together to construct public opinion through their discussions, and researchers go as far as concluding that it is “as if mass communication has revived the salon” (Wyatt, Katz, and Kim 2000) (p. 90).

Fluidity and boundaries

Wyatt et al. also highlight the fluidity of the boundaries between political subjects and more personal issues, all of which are, with varying frequency, subjects of conversation. This fluidity was also found in participant observation research on informal political interaction in an Ann Arbor corner store (Walsh 2004). Walsh reports that regardless of the length of political conversations, the “transitioning between them and other subjects of life is virtually seamless” (p. 40). Membership in the groups studied helped individuals clarify their social identities, which identities came to form the basis of the perspectives for interpreting and communicating about political events. In groups where identities are shared, members rely on

them to talk about politics. Their shared perspectives influence the considerations that enter conversations and the kind of comments that are discouraged. Identity development in the group means members are sorting out what partisan identification (in this case Conservatism) means. But this sorting out occurs as a by-product of informal talk, and – as Schudson predicts for sociable conversation – it reinforces participants in their shared views, and ultimately reinforces social divisions. The corner store where Walsh’s group meets is segregated by race and, to a lesser extent, by class and gender. There is no communicative interaction between the white men of the Republican group and the black, blue-collar, female, or younger patrons who are regularly present in the same physical space of the corner store. They observe each other but do not talk, and this arrangement is never challenged.

There can be no deliberation under conditions of structural inequality, and on the basis of Walsh’s research, such inequalities can prohibit even everyday conversation among different groups. The marginalised may respond by coming together to form parallel public spaces (Herbst 1994) or ‘counterpublics’, understood as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1992) (p. 123). Everyday talk in such counterpublics acquires special political significance. In a contemporary example of how the everyday acquires political significance, the mundane interactions of daily life enables African Americans to construct meaningful political worldviews (Harris-Lacewell 2004). Everyday talk is a means of interpreting and making sense of the political world for black people who come together in the churches, barbershops or beauty salons that constitute black public spaces. The conversations in these spaces do not have to be overtly political to help people understand inequality in America, define the importance of race in inequality, or devise strategies for advancing the interests of self and group. The repertoire of communication is broad: worship, discussion, music, laughter, news,

personal anecdote, urban legend, tall tales all serve as means of engaging people in conversation. Popular culture and black news media alike convey information about black people, reinforcing shared cultural norms and actions. This is sociable conversation with a political role in the lives of participants, even if the politics is not necessarily articulated as such.

The conception of deliberative democracy advocated by Mansbridge would have no trouble recognising and understanding everyday activities of this kind as political. The healthy working of the full deliberative system would nonetheless require the arguments and positions shaped in the protected milieu of homogenous black spaces to be brought into the public arenas of political discussion. A possible solution is proposed by Walsh (2004) who urges for more intergroup dialogue programmes, also as a way forward to concrete policy change. Her research on civic dialogue programmes on race since found that communities turn to talk as a way to address their problems in productive ways. What emerges from civic dialogue is that deliberation can build common ground, while at the same time it also involves listening to people with divergent views (Walsh 2006). But these findings also confirm the point that channelling the resources boosted by everyday talk into political decision making remains a central concern for democracy, whichever of its conceptions is adopted.

Everyday political talk in history

There is a certain irony in the ambivalence democratic theory and political communication research displays towards everyday political talk, considering how non-democratic regimes have no such qualms in granting significance to what people are discussing among themselves in private, semi-public, and public spaces. In recent history, the secret police in Communist countries built up an extensive network of informers who reported diligently on private conversations among their friends, relatives, co-workers, acquaintances.

The state authorities in those ‘people’s democracies’ recognised everyday talk as a potential hotbed of dissent and subversion and kept it under close scrutiny. Nor were totalitarian regimes the first in history to scrutinise the population in this way, for the practice was already widespread in the absolutist monarchies of the 18th century where police spies were watching closely citizens’ everyday exchanges.

Habermas and his critics

The connection between everyday talk and the rise of the public in Europe was theorised in Habermas’s extremely influential book about the birth of the public sphere (Habermas 1989). Habermas states that the private discourse and sociability among citizens acquired public significance in Europe in the 18th century. The ‘bourgeois’ public sphere was a product of the rise of capitalism and the rise of the modern nation-state. The early capitalist commercial economy created an autonomous sphere of exchange that was subject to its own laws, and the expansion of markets fostered increasingly wide and dense communication networks with growing volumes of information flowing through postal services, transportation, commercial sheets and newspapers. The national extension of the economy left the state to administer these territories, making it an impersonal locus of authority in opposition to which society could articulate itself. The modern notion of the public thus depended on an opposition of state and society, which made it possible for a private sphere of society to acquire public relevance. The family was reconstituted as a sphere of intimacy and affection where the affirmation of ordinary life was grounded, while the norms of the bourgeois family first entered the literary public sphere, in e.g. sentimental novels. The literary world of letters paved the way for the political relevance of the public sphere by developing the institutional bases and network of social relationships that fostered public discussion. The coffee house, the journal of opinion, the salon, the table society were scenes

where rational-critical discussion about issues of common concern were initially developed for literary works, but could then be carried over to political discussions.

In order to become authoritative bases for political action, the arguments occurring in the 'mixed companies' of civil society also had to display features that guaranteed the quality of discourse. First, in the public sphere, discussions were driven by the dictates of reason. Rational argument was the only arbiter in debates, the status, authority or identity of participants was disregarded. Second, the public sphere was inclusive in principle. Anyone was a potential member, although in practice participation required a certain level of education and access to cultural products like books, newspapers, print publications, and so on. Third, any issue could be introduced to the agenda, nothing was immune from discussion, not even areas over which until then the church or the state monopolised interpretation. The public sphere was hostile to secrecy, to an understanding of politics as a mystery left for rulers and ministers to practice. And fourth, discussion was critical. Nothing was immune from criticism, and the public sphere tended to produce oppositional views.

Habermas's work is simultaneously a historical account of the emergence of the public sphere and a normative ideal, and it has been criticised extensively on both grounds (Calhoun 1992). His critics point out that Habermas failed to take into account religion, book print culture, and science as sources that induced polemics, critical reflection, and discussion (Zaret 1992). The restriction of the public sphere to a bourgeois conception ignores other social groups, including noblemen and professionals like pastors who were part of the reading and debating public. Habermas ignores social movements or the subsidiary publics that attempt to use force to gain their ends, even though these are crucial for introducing new issues into public discussion. His account also ignores issues of gender. Nor does he consider the plebeian public sphere, political radicalism, or the burgeoning popular literature that does not conform to a rational-critical ideal. With all these elements taken into consideration, his critics

conclude, the public sphere is better thought of as multiple, overlapping or contending public spheres, involving a field of discursive connections.

Nevertheless, the lasting fascination with Habermas's theory inspired a wave of research into the history of the public sphere, providing great insight into what the 17th- and 18th-century publics were debating, where and how. Historians agree that economic developments, changes in religious arguments, the weakening of central political authority, and the emergence of a burgeoning associational life in society provided the conditions in the background against which people, that is common citizens outside the arena of political decision making developed an interest in discussing politics. This development in turn expanded the sphere of the 'political' to institutions (understood in the anthropological sense) that had not had political connotations before. The resulting processes of democratisation, a changing flow of political information, and the changing relations of citizens vis-à-vis their rulers led to the expansion of the realm of the political also partly through the creation of 'public opinion' as a politically relevant entity.

The public sphere in the making was far more diverse, lively, messy, and complex than Habermas originally allowed. It was not only the companies whose discussions constituted the emerging public that were mixed: so were the political information circulating among them, the motivations for forming associations, the arenas that came to accommodate the debating public, and the styles of the political discussions.

Arenas and standards of 18th-century political discussion

During the 18th century in Europe, social interaction occurred increasingly in taverns, inns, alehouses, and coffeehouses. These public spaces were open to all who could pay for a drink⁹, and they became the centres for a range of activities including finding jobs, conducting business transactions, trading stock, exchanging information, initiating freemasons, plotting

⁹ The term 'pub' itself refers to the drinking place as a public house.

crimes, and celebrating important events like marriages or baptisms. Weaved into this web of activity were the more directly political exchanges of circulating newspapers, soliciting votes, attacking ministers, and debating wars (Melton 2001). As stages of associational life, the taverns and inns of London were increasingly heterogeneous in their clientele. Numbering 8,000 by the middle of the 18th century, the taverns of London were a crucial forum for political expression and association, acting as a major source of political news and gossip for people who otherwise had no access to government information. Popular rumour in these public forums helped people understand high politics. At the same time, the openness of such forums also made it possible for the government to install spies in taverns and monitor public opinion to root out sedition.

There were considerable differences between countries in how overt and organised political discussion in public became. In Britain political clubs were helped by party factionalism too extreme to be contained by parliament, which allowed politics to spill over to extraparliamentary settings. Tavern politics were used by Tory and Whig politicians for plotting strategy, mobilising electoral support, and political agitation, and the radical clubs and associations made taverns their organisational centre. In France, cafés and wineshops became rapidly politicised in the euphoria early on in the Revolution.

The arrival of the coffeehouse signalled new opportunities for associational life – and prompted Habermas to name Great Britain the first country where “a public sphere that functioned in the political realm arose” (Habermas 1989) (p. 57). The first English coffeehouse was opened in Oxford around 1650, and by the 1670s coffeehouses in London were the places to discuss politics, plays, foreign news, and join clubs. Coffeehouses, which numbered 2,000 in London by Queen Anne’s reign, were noted for their inclusiveness and social heterogeneity, as well as for their steady supply of news. Pamphlets, newspapers, poems, and broadsides were available for denizens to read at the coffeehouse, where they

could also be discussed instantly together with the gossips and rumours that circulated on the premises. The significance of the collectively produced discussions was such that politicians and journalists went to coffeehouses to collect news and opinions (Pincus 1995).

But not all discussion of public affairs was rational-critical in nature. Discussions were full of non-rational elements including satire, caricature, profanity, obscenity, or the occasional pornographic take on the ruling classes. Nor was discussion only fuelled by and limited to Enlightened rational treatises, as literary works like poems or novels, songs, cartoons, (mock) rituals and the like were integral to it. Robert Darnton's research of pre-Revolution France concluded that no separate realms existed for popular and elite culture in France in the mid-18th century (Darnton 2000). French readers made sense of politics by incorporating news into the frames provided by libel literature. The themes of the scandalous libelle books centred on the private lives of the king and the ruling elite, spreading outrage over the ignominy of the king, mocking his degradation by his mistresses, pillorising the dubious morals of lovers and courtiers. Private life and public affairs were inseparable, as were the modes of communication for disseminating information about them (Darnton 1982). Messages were spread and amplified in printed, oral, and written form that always involved discussion and sociability. What mattered was the feedback and convergence of interpretations about the political system, spread in salons, public spots for news exchange, café gossip, romans à clef, songs whose verse was copied on scraps of paper and swapped for other verse. The diversity of the communication system also helped the inclusion of a wide range of social groups: the songs and verse recited in cafés or the streets transmitted the news to the illiterate, as did the discussions about them.

Discussion in fact and theory

Given the magnitude of associational life in Britain, it is interesting that no philosophical justification of the importance and freedom of voluntary associations was

articulated until the early 19th century (Clark 2000). Prior to 1800, the public significance of associations was explained in empirical, functionalist terms, arguing for their importance in improving knowledge and civility among people, and integrating disparate groups, thereby promoting union and harmony. Voluntarism was also recognised as an alternative mechanism for dealing with public issues and problems. In the face of the disruptions caused by Tory-Whig party factionalism, there was much need for neutral arenas, and associations operated in more harmonious ways by virtue of some bracketing of party and religious divisions among members. As the *Spectator*¹⁰ reported in March 1711,

“Our Modern celebrated Clubs are founded upon Eating and Drinking, which are Points wherein most Men agree, and in which the Learned and Illiterate, the Dull and the Airy, the Philosopher and the Buffoon, can all of them bear a Part. (...) When Men are thus knit together, by Love of Society, not a Spirit of Faction, and do not meet to censure or annoy those that are absent, but to enjoy one another. When they are thus combined for their own improvement, or for the Good of others, or at least to relax themselves from the Business of the Day, by an innocent and chearful Conversation, there may be something very useful in these little Institutions and Establishments.”

Unity and cohesion in associations was promoted by the efforts to instil a collective ethos and identity of the group. Traditional elements of socialising like eating, drinking, singing were made fundamental to club meetings. And central to the life of many clubs, uniting their membership was conversation. Conversation proceeded under rules that stressed cooperation and the equality of speaker rights, while informality and spontaneity were helped by the avoidance of business talk and the inclusion of jests, conundrums, riddles, rebuses, puns in the repertoire.

¹⁰ Downloaded from <http://meta.montclair.edu/spectator/text/march1711/no9.html> - last accessed June 8, 2006.

In political terms, the most significant contribution of Britain's clubs, societies, and associations was the low-level but regular political experience they offered their members. They provided a social space where the social and cultural identities of urban, better-off citizens could be constantly reformulated and reshaped. Otherwise, their impact remained altogether "muffled" and limited (Clark 2000). Associational life may have been the field of discursive action where Britain's public opinion was being forged, but it was practised rather than theorised during the 18th century.

Meanwhile in France the absolutist state was fighting a losing battle with public opinion. While in theory the king was still the only public person, and politics was to occur in his mind and person, in practice the political debates on finance/economics and religion made increasingly explicit appeals to public opinion. By the 1770s, public political discussion expanded into a "full-scale pamphlet war" (Baker 1990), and public opinion was utilised for polemic ends. The government was unable to resist the force of political contestations, instead it was pressured to participate in them by publishing longer and more explicit explanations and justifications of its policies and granting tacit permission to relatively independent newspapers. Public opinion was becoming a 'concrete reality' to the point that by 1745 the monarchy saw fit to test it: it sowed rumours about a tax rise and monitored the reactions in the reports filed by police spies, which reports picked up grumblings, oaths, and insults directed toward the minister from cafés and public spaces (Ozouf 1996).

The emergence of public opinion as an "imaginary authority", however, posed a dilemma even for those who advocated it. Apart from being a powerful political force that could limit the freedom of action of government, public opinion was also recognised to be unpredictable, capricious, an easy prey to transient fashions (Doyle 1980). 'Opinion' carried the connotations of doubtful or probable knowledge, linked to individual sentiment, and the turbulence of England's political system did nothing to alleviate the wariness and suspicion

with which the French viewed 18th-century political changes. The Enlightenment responded to this challenge by arguing that ‘opinion’ loses its instability and irrationality by virtue of becoming ‘public’. Public opinion for them was to be the enlightened expression of the active and open discussion of all matters political, emerging from the free exercise of public voice regarding the daily conduct of affairs (Baker 1990). It was but another name for the “self-evident” that the enlightened man could meet and recognise in the books he read and the circles he frequented, proceeding to pass it on to the less enlightened. Public opinion arrived at this way would also prevent factions and the disagreements the English had the misfortune to suffer. In France, public opinion was thus debated within a “religion of unity” (Ozouf 1996). In the process of replacing conventional authorities, it acquired some of the archaic traits ascribed to them, including the dream of all citizens integrated within the collective. As the revolution swept away the old regime, the Jacobins quickly reverted to the dream of perfect unity between the community and its guides. ‘Public opinion’ bore too much of the mark of liberty and subjectivity to fit into this political effort, and it was replaced in Jacobin texts by ‘esprit public’ or ‘conscience publique’.

Reading the historical accounts of the emergence of the public sphere and the rise of public opinion, one is struck by the familiarity of many features of 18th-century practices and institutions of political discussion. Some of the hopes and concerns raised about increased public participation also resonate with the theoretical issues raised in contemporary debates about democracy. Under what conditions can discussion be the foundation of democratic legitimacy? What are the desirable scope and arenas of political participation in large-scale, complex societies? What institutional framework and incentive system can induce better deliberations? In the next chapter, I consider these issues from another possible angle, one

that places information and communication technologies (ICTs) at the heart of the old dilemmas of democracy and discussion.

CHAPTER II: ICTS AND DEMOCRACY

Ten years ago the US Supreme Court declared in the justification for its decision to strike down the Communications Decency Act that “It is no exaggeration to conclude that the internet has achieved, and continues to achieve, the most participatory marketplace of mass speech that this country – and indeed the world – has yet seen” (ACLU v. Reno)¹¹. The judges went on to assert that internet communication has “democratizing” effects, for “individual citizens of limited means can speak to a worldwide audience on issues of concern to them. Federalists and Anti-Federalists may debate the structure of their government nightly, but these debates occur in newsgroups or chat rooms rather than in pamphlets. Modern-day Luthers still post their theses, but to electronic bulletin boards rather than the door of the Wittenberg Schlosskirche. More mundane (but from a constitutional perspective, equally important) dialogue occurs between aspiring artists, or French cooks, or dog lovers, or fly fishermen.”

The Supreme Court’s reasoning cast a – legally binding – vote for the conception of the internet as a participatory medium, while the assumptions underlying the decision also hinted at a deliberative conception of democracy, in the sense that dialogue or discussion was seen as an essential form of participation. Furthermore, online participation even in discussions of mundane issues was declared to merit First Amendment protection, which move was compatible with how Mansbridge (1999) understands the political, that is, everything the public “ought to discuss” (p. 214). It seemed that with the growth and diffusion of the internet, the democratic dilemmas were being decided in favour of a participatory conception, and theoretical justifications of the internet as a participatory public sphere were emerging hand-in-hand with the practices of discussion online.

¹¹ The text of the Supreme Court decision was downloaded from www.ciec.org/decision_PA/decision_text.html - last accessed June 11, 2006.

Visions of an ICT-enabled participatory public sphere

Concepts of the internet as a participatory public sphere start out from the premise that democracy includes a set of conditions and procedures for arriving at collective decisions in a way that secures the fullest participation of all citizens possibly affected by those decisions. Communication has a special significance for the legitimacy of democratic decisions, for it provides a system of participatory structures for deliberation and the dissemination of knowledge. Although there exist different conceptualisations of the internet and democracy (Dahlberg 2001), all ‘camps’ share an enthusiasm about the potential of the internet to bring along the increased participation of citizens in the democratic process.

One of the reasons for emphasising participation and inclusion in relation to the internet is the widely discussed thesis that contemporary democratic politics suffers from a crisis, as evidenced by declining voter turnout and low levels of public participation. These are seen as symptoms of the public’s alienation from the democratic process and from political institutions. Traditional mass media are often blamed for public apathy, as researchers claim that pre-internet public spaces of communication characterised by a scarcity of broadcasting channels and spectrum and a highly constricted access to them all but strangle democratic discourse. The media are said to force people into passive consumption, limiting interaction to changing channels. Regardless of how audience reception studies have shown that watching television is a complex activity (Morley 1980; Morley 1986), and the ‘passive consumer’ practising ‘easy citizenship’ in front of the telly (Hart 1996; Neveu 2005) is a construct of a rather pessimistic strand of social science, calls for a new media-assisted galvanisation of the public (Meeks 1997), or the “end of broadcast media and the beginning of the great conversation” (Barlow 1997) remain persistent.

The public sphere and information policies shaping it can be tested for their degree of compliance with the participatory framework by (a) testing opportunities of access to it, and (b) its content (Venturelli 1998). Access to the internet, then, must be made universal, that is admission to public communication networks must not discriminate voices from being heard in public. It is this demand that the opportunities presented by the new communication medium should be extended to all that underlies most of the discussion about the digital divide (Compaine 2001; Norris 2001), while ensuring that no group of citizens is left out from electronic participation continues to be a top priority for policy makers as well.¹²

In terms of content, adequate space must be reserved on the internet for public dialogue, discussion, and deliberation, as well as forums for information. A participatory public sphere must provide diverse representations of social reality in the form of a substantive diversity of opinion, argument, and discourse. The potential of ICTs is in the open forums organised by groups in the public sphere and engaged public input in communicative exchanges with agencies (Schlosberg and Dryzek 2002). Information policy therefore needs to address the content as well as the infrastructure of public spaces, instead of relying on the liberal conception of a marketplace of ideas that models public spaces on the market (Schiller 2000).

This is the strong thesis of the internet as a participatory public sphere. There are, however, more liberal arguments about how the internet can support the renewal of citizen democracy (Berman and Weitzner 1997). This approach maintains the normative desirability of widespread public participation in the democratic process but is closer to market liberalism in its conception of how the participatory aim is to be achieved. A programmatic summary of the liberal take on how internet technologies can improve the state of democracy is provided

¹² For example, the European Commission's eEurope 2005 Action Plan was "to make information society accessible to all", with 'e-Inclusion' as a key element of the process. An EU-level e-inclusion project was set up (<http://www.einclusion-eu.org/>), and plans were made for creating the position of Accessibility Ombudsman (<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/03/199&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en> - last accessed June 5, 2006).

by US political consultants specialising in new media: “revolution, direct democracy, and the marketplace” (Howard 2006). The internet here is seen as an opportunity for increased participation, with a competitive, vibrant market as the driving force behind the development of its infrastructure and, rather importantly, the choices of citizens as the force that shapes the content that appears on the internet. Consequently, if the democratic character encoded in the open, decentralised structure of the internet is to be preserved, people need to actually use the internet for democratic purposes.

In the participatory vision, interactive communication networks are needed to help learning by the dissemination of knowledge and active participation for all citizens, not just the already advantaged and politically engaged. The “literacy of the online civil arts” can and ought to be taught to citizens if they are to be ‘empowered’ by the discursive opportunities at their disposal (Rheingold 2003). The emphasis on the need for such education confirms indirectly the assertion that the relationship of ICTs and democracy is contingent on what people do with technologies in ordinary, everyday life (Salter 2004).

Politics and technologies of the ‘participatory public sphere’

The idea that ICTs can help reinvigorate civil society and increase political participation is not a new one, even if the rise and diffusion of the internet provided an additional boost in the 1990s to thinking about democracy in terms of increased participation and deliberation. Writing in 1970 (over twenty years before the release of the World Wide Web), the German New Left theorist Hans Magnus Enzensberger was arguing for the replacing of ‘repressive’ uses of the media with ‘emancipatory’ media use (Enzensberger 1970). He claimed that the emancipatory use would include decentralised programmes, with every receiver being a potential transmitter. Interaction between participants and collective production would be the norm, and the masses would be mobilised. The emancipatory use of

the media would also facilitate a political learning process and social control through self-organisation.

Similar assumptions continue to emerge in punditry that welcomes technological developments with essentially unchanged expectations of democratisation. Thus Enzensberger's assumptions about communications media were shared by more recent proponents of teledemocracy or electronic democracy who claimed that new media are enabling masses of people to join in the flow of public information and political decision making¹³. 'Electronic populism', or the idea that an ICT-enabled direct democracy can and should replace representative systems captured the fantasy of futurologists (Toffler 1980), political scientists (Becker and Slaton 2000), broadcasting professionals (Grossman 1995), and presidential candidates (Ross Perot).

Political visions tend to drive theories of teledemocracy, even to the detriment of a nuanced consideration of ICTs. Technology, be it interactive television or the internet, is treated as simply a tool in creating participatory democratic structures through the electronic town hall, video democracy, or the electronic republic (London 1993). The first 'electronic town hall' taking place over the Qube cable TV system in Columbus, Ohio inspired Toffler to announce that "Using this interactive communications system, residents of a small Columbus suburb actually took part via electronics in a political meeting (...). This is only the first, most primitive indication of tomorrow's potential for direct democracy. Using advanced computers, satellites, telephones, cable, polling techniques, and other tools, an educated citizenry can, for the first time in history, begin making many of its own political decisions" (Toffler 1980) (p. 446). Then in the mid-1990s, a "new, original, state-of-the-art implementation of an Electronic Town Hall" was made possible by internet Relay Chat (IRC) accompanied in some sessions by the computer video-conferencing software CU-SeeMe,

¹³ A recent application of Enzensberger's criteria for the evaluation of the 'emancipatory' potential of the Wiki is Ebersbach, Anja, and Markus Glaser. 2004. Towards Emancipatory Use of a Medium: The Wiki. *International Journal of Information Ethics* 2 (11).

“effective because it is interactive, real-time, flexible, and offers simultaneous collection of opinion on a state, regional, and nation-wide basis” (Koen 1995).

As the two quotes show, ICTs heralded as instrumental to teledemocracy can change over time without the core political initiative changing with them. The core political initiative for many early prophets of electronic democracy was the implementation of direct democracy. In theory, ICTs are capable of overcoming the barriers in space and time that prevent the practices of direct democratic involvement of large numbers of citizens. Mass participation becomes possible if people can let their preferences known by pushing a button (or, more recently, pointing and clicking), and the regular use of such practices would help diminish the distance gaping between voters and their elected representatives. As Howard’s (2006) research on e-politics consultants makes clear, the ideal of an ICT-assisted direct democracy continues to have an influence¹⁴, even though it has been heavily criticised (Schudson 1992). Some critics call conceptions of teledemocracy the “technical fix” solution (Street 1992), which refers to the problem that the faith in the democratic capacity of technology creates an illusion that the problems of democracy can be solved easily with ICTs. In large, heterogeneous societies the size of the masses eligible to vote, the limited time available for political participation, and the costs of becoming informed about political issues are not hurdles that would go away if an interactive communications device is installed in every living room (Noam 2005).

¹⁴ The ideal of direct democracy was recently given an additional boost by political science research of the economic/social choice school that paints a comparatively positive picture of initiatives and referenda (Lupia, Arthur, and John G. Matsusaka. 2004. Direct Democracy: New Approaches to Old Questions. *Annual Review of Political Science* 7 (1):463-482, Matsusaka, John G. 2005. Direct Democracy Works. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19 (2):185–206.). However, even the proponents of the “new science of direct democracy” warn that it is no panacea, and they urge for a scientific approach to empirical and theoretical research to understand direct democracy.

To claim otherwise also ignores important issues of preference formation. As early as 1977, Laudon warned that the answer to the problem of political participation was not national electronic town halls or national plebiscites. Rather, he saw the answer in “somehow developing participatory methods that increase the deliberative and organisational power of the citizenry vis-a-vis the corporate and governmental gargantua that dominates political life” (Laudon 1977) (p. 107). Unlike the early cyber-prophets claimed, there is no straightforward causal link between increased citizen participation and direct democracy. It is possible to argue that democratic participation will strengthen, not undermine representation (Blumler and Coleman 2001). The role that ICTs can play in this process is crucial: they enable citizens and their representatives to achieve ‘direct representation’, that is a closeness and mutuality that can go a long way to alleviate the disconnection that currently characterises their relations (Coleman 2005b).

Much of the writing on teledemocracy has deterministic underpinnings. The deterministic approach considers ICTs like the internet to be ‘technologies of freedom’ (Pool 1983), that is they are democratic by nature. Technological change actively causes social change, thus the widespread use of democratic ICTs inevitably brings about the democratisation of public life¹⁵. Technological determinism has been criticised for oversimplifying the complex relationships between technologies and the social circumstances in which they exist and through which they get their meaning. The literature of the social shaping of technology (SST) highlights the social aspects that shape technological change, including design choices during the development process that are influenced by a host of social factors (Williams and Edge 1996). Technology itself is a social product shaped by the conditions of its creation and use; ICTs emerge and are disseminated not according to some

¹⁵ It is worth noting that one of the strongest justifications for the technological determinism approach arises from dictatorial regimes that try to prevent and control the spread of ICTs like the internet to defend their political status quo.

sort of an internal logic they possess, rather as an outcome of piecemeal, trial and error experimentation. In a critique of the SST approach, Woolgar claims that even the ‘residual technicism’ should be purged from the social constructionist view. From this perspective, technological artifacts should be recognised to have no capacities unaffected by human interpretations. Technologies should be treated as ‘texts’, ‘written’ (configured) by developers, producers, and marketers, and ‘read’ by users and consumers in open and negotiated processes (Woolgar 1996).

Between the extremes of technological determinism and technology-as-text lies the approach that understands technologies in terms of their affordances. This perspective agrees that the discourses for making sense of technologies are important, but it also holds that some technologies have features that others lack: it is easier to kill people with guns than with roses, and these features of either the gun or the rose are not arbitrarily derived from talk about them (Hutchby 2001). The range of possible interpretations of technologies is constrained by common-sense understandings of ordinary actors in everyday life. Different technologies possess different affordances which constrain the way they can be read; a gun does not lend itself to the same set of possible interpretations as a rose (or an electric guitar). Affordances are the possibilities that objects offer for action, and the uses of objects are also material aspects of the thing as it is encountered in the course of action. Consequently, the ‘impact’ of technologies on social interaction can be best approached through an analytical focus on what people do with technologies in ordinary, everyday life.

The ‘impact’ of ICTs and the internet on democracy can thus be understood by exploring what people do with/around/via them. The history of communication offers spectacular examples of technological dead-ends, or cases where ICTs ended up being used in radically different ways from the original conception of their designers. The telephone for instance was originally conceived as a tool for mass entertainment, installed in homes for the

reception of broadcast programmes. Similarly, Knight-Ridder was taken by surprise when the most popular feature of their experimental videotex system became not the reading of news and information but messaging among users. More recently, text messaging functions were added to mobile phones as a marginal feature for maintenance, only to become one of the key modes of communication among mobile phone owners (at least in Europe and Asia; SMS failed to take off in the same way in the United States). These stories seem to lend weight to an argument that would claim people above all want to communicate with one another. The question then remains, to what extent do citizen conversations online become political?

Citizen engagement online

Although we do not have definitive answers yet on how the internet will reconfigure democratic polities, one of the arguments made in the participatory public sphere ideal of the internet is that ICTs can – discursively at least – empower citizens or groups that hitherto had no access to the political arena. The thesis of empowerment or emancipation tends to rest on assumptions about the desire of citizens to play a more active part in politics, and the assumptions are to a degree supported by empirical research.

Citizen engagement online: the demand side

Survey data from 1996 showed that people across Europe had very high levels of interest in engaging in electronic debate with politicians (Gibson and Ward 1999). The interest was expressed regardless of the relatively low levels of internet use that characterised the population of European countries ten years ago. At the same time, interest in live debate via the internet was most closely linked to how politically engaged respondents were: the odds for wanting to enter online discussion were significantly increased if a person was already frequently discussing politics. By 2005, survey results showed two in five British internet users believing that the internet helps people express their concerns to government

(Dutton, di Gennaro, and Millwood Hargrave 2005). At the same time, few users were opting for actually contacting their MP or councillor via email (3 and 5 percent), which may justify a proactive strategy by decision makers in soliciting the public's engagement in Britain.

In the United States, no soliciting was needed: since the 1998 beginning of President Clinton's impeachment process, whenever the public became aware of a contentious issue, they used the 'fast and easy' communication channel of e-mail to express their views to Capitol Hill. The volume of e-mail traffic overwhelmed Congress to a degree where a communications crisis was declared (Goldschmidt 2001)¹⁶. The choice of e-mail as a way of communicating with representatives fits into the popular patterns of internet use for political ends. The internet in America became an increasingly important tool for learning about and contributing to political life between 1996 and 2002. In 2002, 16 percent of the US population reported to have joined campaigns, volunteered time, donated money, or participated in polls online, and 20 percent said that information they got online helped them make up their mind about how to vote at the elections (Howard 2005). Another survey from 2003 reported 14 percent of respondents having used the internet in the previous 12 months to contact an elected representative, government official, or candidate for office to express their opinion about a local, national, or international issue; 11 percent signed an internet petition; 9 percent said they had used the internet to try to persuade another person about their view on a local, national, or international issue; and 6 percent said they had worked together with others in an Internet community to try to deal with a local issue or problem (Best and Krueger 2005). Other survey data show that in 2003, 4 percent of the adult population in America participated in an online forum to discuss a public issue, while 24 percent engaged at least a few times in an internet or instant message conversation about public issues (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004). At the same time, 25 percent of respondents attended a formal or informal

¹⁶ In 1998, 20 million e-mail messages reached the House of Representatives; by 2000, the number shot up to 48 million, and it continued to grow by one million on average per month.

meeting to discuss public issues, 31 percent tried to persuade someone how to vote, 47 percent tried to persuade someone to change their view on a public issue, and 68 percent reported face-to-face or telephone conversations about public issues at least a few times per month.

Survey data reveal that the internet is still not the medium of first choice for political engagement among citizens, but the number of people engaging in political activities online is growing. Such data on the other hand tend to focus on individual level internet use and do not say much about how the internet is used by advocacy organisations, social movements, and groups that are the most successful in mobilising grassroots activism. The literature on political activism and social movements on the internet offers examples of the changing access relations in the public sphere (Ayers 1999; Dutton and Lin 2001; Kahn and Kellner 2004; McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Tsagarousianou, Tambini, and Bryan 1998; Tsaliki 2003). Grassroots organisations are making use of the internet-enabled exchange of information for coordinating political activity. Environmental activists, whose political agenda travels well beyond national borders, exploit the potential of the internet by organising and mobilising cross-nationally more quickly and cheaply than previously (Pickerill 2001; Tsaliki 2003). Independent, non-mainstream journalism, as exemplified by the global Indymedia initiative whose goal is the “creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth”¹⁷, continues to organise and grow online (Hyde 2002; Pickard 2006). Anti-globalisation protesters made use of the internet in organising and coordinating their mass demonstrations from Seattle to Genova, just like the campaign against the war on Iraq was reportedly boosted by the online circulation of messages.¹⁸ The development of computer technology itself has

¹⁷ Source: Independent Media Center (<http://www.indymedia.org/en/static/about.shtml> - last accessed July 11, 2006).

¹⁸ Anecdotal evidence for the importance of the internet in the anti-war demonstrations would include an episode from Budapest, Hungary (a country with not much direct stake in the war on Iraq). One of the people who gave pro-peace speeches at the Budapest rally on February 15, 2003, a 19-year-old student, introduced herself to the crowd by her name as well as the nickname she uses on online discussion forums, adding that perhaps some of

been a ground for activists, with the open source movement arguing for access to the end product's sources and, more controversially, with hackers and the forces of the law fighting politically charged battles over issues of ownership and control of ICTs (Thomas 2000; Vegh 2005). In a changing political environment it is also possible to interpret acts of consumption as sites of citizen involvement in politics, and some of the most successful consumer actions were orchestrated on the internet (Scammell 2000).

What the literature on social movements and activism online confirms is that the arena of the political has been opened up to areas that had not been considered of public concern before. Some researchers argue that the ICT-enabled opening up of the political arena creates a new kind of politics with cuts across the boundaries between politics, cultural values, civil values and identity processes (Bentivegna 2006). Others argue that even if ICTs are not necessarily producing 'new' citizens, they "provide for new and important citizenship practices" (Hermes 2006) (p. 306). It is a reasonable assumption that grassroots activists, as well as individual citizens who engage in politics online eventually wish to open up a conversation also with decision makers, be they of the government or corporations.

Citizen engagement online: the supply side

Decision makers in different countries acted on citizen expectations with varying speed and enthusiasm. Although websites were already playing an increasingly important role in the US elections from 1996, candidates and their staff were initially found to be reluctant to include human-interaction elements in the campaigns for fears that two-way interaction with random citizens would undermine control over the candidate's image and communication strategy (Stromer-Galley 2000). In Holland, where participatory decision making especially at the local level gained increased popularity during the 1990s, the plethora of techniques for involving citizens in policy decisions includes internet discussions. Yet elected politicians

the demonstrators knew her better by her online identifier. Even if this episode lacks data on how many people were mobilised into action by the internet (the rally was well publicised in the mass media too), it highlights the peace activist's perception that her online presence was somehow significant in relation to her political activism.

display ambiguous attitudes towards the new forms of citizen participation, willingly initiating such projects but at the same time ignoring the outcomes for fears that their political authority could be undermined (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). In the United Kingdom, the government was criticised for investing in e-government services and transactions between citizens and the government instead of developing the participatory arenas offered by the internet (Morison and Newman 2001). Government sites were also criticised for serving the legitimisation of government decisions, preferring “professional communication and service delivery” to encouraging “critical citizen deliberation” (Chadwick 2006) (p. 108). In Austria, politicians at the federal and provincial levels of administration were found to be an ‘inhibiting factor’ in the development of e-democracy initiatives as opposed to the implementation of electronic administrative activities (Mahrer and Krimmer 2005). On the other hand, research on e-democracy initiatives in new, ‘third-wave’ democracies found both levels of citizen demand for more public involvement in the policy process and policy-makers buying into e-democracy initiatives, although the projects still had to struggle with middle-level bureaucratic resistance to adapt governments to the culture of e-participation (Coleman and Kaposi 2006).

On the whole, the gradual incorporation of new media into established institutions of political decision making led to the opening up of vertical communication channels to electronic interaction between citizens and their elected representatives. The Scottish Parliament introduced online petitioning to “encourage public participation in governance through the use of on-line electronic petitioning”. The initiative seems to have found favour with users who appreciate the ease and efficiency it brings to the practice of petitioning, along with the democratic opportunities of commenting and deliberating on the issues raised in the petitions (Malina, Macintosh, and Davenport 2001). The Scottish system served as the model

for a similar initiative by the German Bundestag¹⁹. Launched in late 2004, the government-funded National Project for Local E-democracy in Britain aimed to ‘help Local Authorities exploit the potential of new technologies for democratic renewal’. The project set up a series of pilot initiatives for political inclusion and participation of local communities in online civic spaces through tailored websites, online discussions, and internet-based toolkits for helping the formation of grassroots civic networks (2005a). By 2003/4, the UK Parliament – whose website was established in 1996 – was discussing not only the need for a ‘radical upgrading’ of the website, but also the greater use of online consultations with citizens as a way of taking account of the views of the wider public (Commons 2004). The House of Commons report also made reference to previous online consultations they had organised to engage members of the public and ‘give a voice to those who would otherwise be excluded’. Between 1998 and 2002, ten consultations were run for Parliament on issues ranging from data protection to e-democracy, domestic violence, family tax credits, stem cell research, or the draft Communications Bill. The consultations were designed to include participants with experience or expertise in relation to the policy issues under discussion and proved successful, largely for their potential to support a “more direct form of representation (...) in which the public is likely to feel less unheard” (Coleman 2004).

Taking deliberative experiments to the internet

The idea that the internet affords opportunities for discursive inclusion was also making an impact on deliberative experiments. New media were introduced to Deliberative Polls® (Fishkin 2005; Iyengar, Fishkin, and Luskin 2003), ‘Virtual Agora’ deliberative polling (Muhlberger 2006; Muhlberger and Weber 2006), and experimental argument repertoire research in the ‘Electronic Dialogues’ (Cappella, Price, and Nir 2002; Price and Cappella 2002). The first online Deliberative Poll® was organised in January 2003 parallel to

¹⁹ <http://itc.napier.ac.uk/e%2DPetition/bundestag/> - last accessed on June 10, 2006

the face-to-face poll in Philadelphia. Participants in both polls were provided with the same background information material and spent about the same amount of time on discussing the issue. Researchers found that the levels of information increased significantly and attitude change occurred in both the online and the offline group after deliberation. The changes, however, were weaker among members of the online group, which prompted the researchers to conclude that online deliberation does not have all the qualities of face to face interaction, though it offers enough to achieve change. In the 'Electronic Dialogues' organised during the 2000 campaign, 60 representative groups of citizens were brought together for monthly real-time electronic discussions about election-related issues. The results of the group deliberations showed that the electronic discussions fostered increased political engagement, and those who participated in the online deliberations tended to have higher argument repertoire scores on the issues discussed. In the 'Virtual Agora Project', participants in online deliberations were found to learn more if reminded of their citizen role prior to their deliberations, which effect did not work in face-to-face conditions. Furthermore, online deliberations directly ameliorated 'false consensus beliefs', that is the belief that there is a broad consensus about the most important problem facing the country and what to do about it. As 'false consensus' beliefs may provide a disincentive to learn new political information, this finding harboured well for deliberation.

By and large, the experimental research projects into organised group deliberation online failed to produce any results that would have suggested the internet had an adverse effect on deliberation. That is consistent with other research that found only small and subtle differences in how the choice of the medium affects citizens' contact with their government (Bimber 1999); or with research that found online chat and discussion equally leading to more enjoyable face-to-face discussions for participants (Dietz-Uhler and Bishop-Clark 2001). However, the research publications on online deliberative polling do not seem to pay any

particular attention to the communication technologies involved in the projects, except for welcoming them as less expensive alternatives to central physical meeting spaces. The implied bracketing of the issue of communication technology in favour of a dominant perspective of the political or democratic agenda may be justified by the desire to avoid a deterministic approach, or by the lack of consensus in judgments about the social ‘effects’ of new ICTs (Spears et al. 2002). Yet this approach seems to echo earlier writings on teledemocracy that view technology as a tool in creating participatory democratic structures. Muhlberger and Weber (2006) actually propose, for “broader effect”, precisely the Televote method developed by teledemocrats Becker and Slaton (2000). Since the Virtual Agora research produced findings to suggest that from the point of deliberative learning, reading and contemplating do as well as discussion, the researchers propose that it is possible to revert to televoting and still maintain a deliberative agora agenda. Discussion in this scheme would be reduced to a pedagogical carrot: “To enhance motivation, Televoters could be invited to online discussions or promised a chance of appearing in televised discussions if they prove especially knowledgeable” (Muhlberger and Weber 2006) (p. 32).

The suggestion of a deliberative experiment that does not include discussion among participants is somewhat counterintuitive, but data from experimental research are necessarily lacking in details about what people do with technologies in ordinary, everyday life. It is through this angle that the relationship of ICTs and democracy is best revealed, and non-experimental research findings suggest that the discussion activities citizens engage in online are burgeoning.

The beginnings of “the great conversation”

Once the concept of participation is extended to the active dissemination of political information and includes discussion, debate, and deliberation with others over matters the public ‘ought to discuss’, political talk among citizens on the internet also becomes an

important part of deliberative democratic activity. It is reasonable to expect that online political discussions are attractive for people who are already engaged politically, take interest in public affairs, and follow the news media. That would be business as usual for political engagement, but there is some evidence that the internet is also offering new opportunities for people who are prevented from discussing politics in their everyday lives. The political conversation spaces on the internet help people overcome barriers such as discomfort generated by disagreement in face-to-face settings, bringing ‘new voices’ to the public sphere (Stromer-Galley 2002b). The concept of ‘voice’ has also been used to highlight how marginalised groups are able to use the internet as a “‘safe’ alternative living space” (Mitra 2006) for finding their voice and gaining recognition (Mitra 2001). For groups like the Indian diasporas, the internet offers a “speaking space” (p. 45) where they can not only speak out and crystallise their identities for themselves, but they can also challenge the dominant world view by forcing it to respond and acknowledge them.

Challenging the dominant becomes possible for marginalised groups on the internet because the medium enables people in subordinated positions to voice their own discourses. In this sense, the internet has a profound equalising force, as it levels access to the public arena. Online deliberation was celebrated for the consistent reduction of the independent influence of social status (Gastil 2000), and news groups were considered a welcome development for democracy because their communicative dynamics were seen to be activated by the substantial equality among members (Bentivegna 1998). Equality among members, the right to intervene prompted only by interest in the issue, the public character of discussion, the size of the audience, and the increased freedom of expression were elements that made discussion groups created in cyberspace a modern version of the Habermasian public sphere, creating “an opportunity to bring the citizens back into talk politics” (Bentivegna 1998). Because of the anonymity they may guarantee and the possibility of the reinvention of user

identities, some forums of online discussion were judged to be promising for equalising participants and allowing the ‘force of the better argument’ to triumph, in the Habermasian spirit (Ó Baoill 2000).

Online deliberation: the vulgata edition

Against the hopeful assessments that see the internet as approximating the ideal of a public sphere, another strand of writing on the internet and discursive engagement produced skeptical assessments of the internet’s contribution to democracy. According to this approach, the internet has become a ‘normalized’ component of political practices and institutions. Instead of revitalising the public sphere and creating a worldwide agora, the internet now confronts regulation, commercialisation, organised political activism, and “masses of bored and indifferent citizens” (Resnick 1997).

Low standards of discussion

Even when citizens participate, their online political discussions fail to live up to the standards of good deliberation (Davis 1999; Hill and Hughes 1998; Papacharissi 2002; Perrolle 1991; Schneider 1997; Streck 1997; Wilhelm 2000; Witschge 2002). Instead of the free, equal, reasoned and consensus-seeking deliberation of the ideal derived from democratic theory, online discussion forums, including well-researched Usenet²⁰ groups, are noted for their manifestations of the hateful and other conflict-fueling examples of what the unrestricted communication of political views can produce. As Davis concludes in his analysis of Usenet political discussions, “people talk past one another, when they are not verbally attacking each other. The emphasis is not problem solving, but discussion dominance. Such behaviour does

²⁰ Usenet is defined in Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usenet> - last accessed on 8 September, 2006) as “a distributed internet discussion system” where “users read and post e-mail-like messages (called “articles”) to a number of distributed newsgroups”. The early days of Usenet are discussed in detail in Hauben, Michael, and Ronda Hauben. *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* 6/12/96 [cited. Available from <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/>].

not resemble deliberation and it does not encourage participation, particularly by the less politically interested” (Davis 1999) (p. 177).

The question arises whether the medium of communication is responsible for the character and tone of discussion on Usenet or other political discussion forums, whether the internet is to blame for the apparent failure of online discussion to live up to deliberative standards. The critics argue that online political discussion affords ‘faceless’ individuals to express or ‘shout’ anonymous views (White 1997), which results in the poor quality of discussion. In other words, when deliberation occurs in a computer-mediated environment, some features of the technology may serve to weaken the chances of good deliberation. The loss of social cues online is said to be conducive to harsh arguments, as it reduces the responsibility individuals have for their utterances (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1987). Nor does ‘faceless’ computer-mediated communication necessarily liberate participants from pre-existing social roles and relations (Postmes, Spears, and Lea 1998; Spears and Lea 1994). If online interaction is extended over time, the social and cultural differences between participants resurface (Jankowski and van Selm 2000). The sceptics conclude that the model of citizens pursuing consensus through rational discussion is systematically denied in the arenas of electronic politics: “In Western civilization, the public sphere was a place people could talk as equals. Status differences did not exclude frank discussion. Rational argument prevailed, and the goal was consensus. (...) As those who read Usenet can tell you, this definition doesn't come close to describing the online world. True, the Net allows people to talk as equals. But rational argument rarely prevails, and achieving consensus is widely seen as impossible” (Poster 1995b).

Arguably, however, the researchers condemning the distance they perceive between actual political discussion on the internet and the deliberative ideal of democracy are engaged

in ‘straw man’ tactics²¹ (Stromer-Galley 2002a). Much of the literature critical of online political talk fails to shed light on online discussion because of an insistence on rigidly defined criteria of ideal deliberation that do not apply in a straightforward manner to the phenomenon being researched. Peter Dahlgren proposes to treat online political discussion “not just in terms of its rational communicative qualities, but also as a form of practice integrated within more encompassing civic cultures” (Dahlgren 2005) (p. 157). The criteria for judging deliberative talk need to be treated and interpreted flexibly, and modified for the circumstances under which deliberation occurs (Mansbridge 1999). Moving along the spectrum of venues of deliberation “entails moving along a similar range, from formal to informal, within the same standards for good deliberation” (p. 227).

Depoliticisation and commercialisation

These approaches highlight the importance of the interpretive, constructionist element inherent to all attempts at making sense of deliberation, democracy, politics, and participation. And now the internet too is part of the efforts, as “global technoculture” provides the conditions under which democracy is being reconceptualised (Dean 2002). The reconceptualisation – or “reimagining”, as Dean puts it (p. 175) – is a profoundly political process. Political science, at least its American variety, has been accused of being captive to its pragmatic self-definition as a discipline studying the state and its polity, and clinging to ‘old blueprints’ in trying to understand new democratic phenomena (Nguyen and Alexander 1996). It is certainly true that much of the literature on politics and the internet details the findings of empirical research that was guided by the classical ideals of an informed citizenry capable (or not) of making rational judgements on complex issues. And when political science teams up with software engineering, there is a danger that the democratic process online may in their accounts be reduced to purely technical issues.

²¹ I am aware that this dissertation too engages occasionally in straw man tactics when constructing the ‘optimist’ and ‘pessimist’ positions on the internet and democracy.

A good case in point is offered by the development of the Virtual Agora project. The Delibera™ software that powered the Virtual Agora was developed under the requirement of “the desire to build a “Platinum” environment for democratic deliberation”, with the new tools potentially becoming “the foundation for a qualitatively different deliberative experience” (Easterling 2003)²². Political science can help this technical process by providing a clear set of goals and requirements the software then can be designed to meet. The development process rests on the recognition that “design follows democratic theory” (Shane 2003), so now social science needs to come up with a common definition and measure of deliberation. In this project, the parties interested in online deliberation are grouped under the ideal types of ‘practitioners’, ‘technologists’, and ‘social scientists’ (Muhlberger 2003). The implication seems to be that the role of citizens in the process is limited to providing feedback at the implementation phase. The absence of citizens from the discussion, coupled with the commercial overtones of the language used and the corporate reminders (™, ®), make the Virtual Agora and the online Deliberative Poll experiments vulnerable to critical²³ interpretations.

The critical position would be vehemently opposed to the apparent depoliticisation of the design process. By depoliticisation, in this context it would mean the bracketing of conflicting understandings of deliberation for the sake of completing the project (i.e. developing the software and using it in online deliberative polling). For critical theory, the internet is “a space of conflicting networks and networks of conflict so deep and fundamental that even to speak of consensus, convergence, equality, or inclusion seems an act of violence” (Dean 2002). This conclusion may be hyperbolic, but it is correct in highlighting the importance of the political dimension in technological design processes.

²² All quotes about the development of the software for deliberation are from the PowerPoint conference presentations made available online.

²³ ‘Critical’ in this context refers to critical theory as originally established by the Frankfurt School, i.e. a radical, emancipatory form of Marxism.

There are anxious voices that warn the development of the internet may follow the same path as earlier mass media structures. In this scenario, the technologically rejuvenated public sphere would fall victim to an industrial culture that produces information revolutions and technological innovations that end up diminishing the possibility of the public's gaining information and knowledge (Consalvo 2003). According to this view, the development of the public sphere in industrial democracies, including the internet or the 'Information Superhighway', is governed by a 'government-industry consensus' to maintain it predominantly for commercial voices, resulting in commercial expression's gaining larger protection in public policy than the citizens' rights of political expression (Murdock 1992).²⁴

As an antidote to the possible negative trends and the consequent diminishing of opportunities to participate, theorists suggest that participatory opportunities should be genuinely available in the public realm. Technological design and practice need to be democratised: "there must be expanded opportunities for people from all walks of life to participate effectively in guiding the evolving technological order" (Sclove 2004) (p. 143). Indeed, citizens' deliberations on public issues should also extend to the very medium that provides the space for deliberation. Citizens must join their voices to the debate about the way the internet is shaped, they must have a clear vision of the media environment they want, otherwise the future of the internet will be shaped for them by large commercial and political powerholders (Kellner n.d.; Sclove 2004).

Fragmentation

Apart from the problems of the quality of online discussions and the commercial impetus increasingly driving new media development, the democratic potential of the internet

²⁴ In a critical take on the 'critical' positions, some researchers argue that the assumption of mutual exclusivity between commercialization and progressive politics is a "Western problematic". The validity of universal claims inspired by this assumption – including the ones made about the demise of public interest in the media or on the internet as a result of commercial forces – needs to be examined in the specific social and historical contexts in which new media initiatives are introduced (Kim, Eun-Gyoo, and James W. Hamilton. 2006. Capitulation to capital? OhmyNews as alternative media. *Media, Culture & Society* 28 (4):541-560.).

has also been questioned on the ground that it undermines the unity and cohesion of the public. In March 2006, Habermas himself made some comments on the internet in a public speech for the first time, and what he had to say threw a sceptical light on the impact of new media on the public sphere: “Use of the Internet has both broadened and fragmented the contexts of communication. This is why the Internet can have a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes. But at the same time, the less formal, horizontal cross-linking of communication channels weakens the achievements of traditional media. This focuses the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public on select topics and information, allowing citizens to concentrate on the same critically filtered issues and journalistic pieces at any given time. The price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the Internet is the decentralised access to unedited stories. In this medium, contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus. (...) I see the reasons for that in the de-formalisation of the public sphere, and in the de-differentiation of the respective roles.”²⁵

Habermas agrees that the internet has equalised access to the public sphere. At the same time, he hints at the fragmentation of the reading and debating publics, with the internet reconfiguring traditional cognitive and communicative divisions of labor to the detriment of intellectuals. The perspective of the intellectual rarely appears in Anglo-American assessment of ICTs and democracy, for the role of the public intellectual is far less prominent there than in the Continental political tradition²⁶. On the other hand, fragmentation and the rethinking of expertise are issues that continue to inform also the Anglo-American approaches to the internet. Fears of fragmentation inspired theorists to view the internet as a threat to democracy on the strength of the objection that users form deliberative ‘enclaves’ online (Buchstein 1997; Sunstein 2001). In essence, this means that the internet allows people to personalise their information intake to the degree that they access only information and opinions they are

²⁵ Excerpts of the speech were translated to English and posted on the website [singandsight](http://www.signandsight.com/features/676.html). Available at <http://www.signandsight.com/features/676.html> - last accessed August 1, 2006.

²⁶ The political role of intellectuals in Hungary is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

interested in or agree with. In the fragmented speech market of the internet, it becomes possible to avoid dealing with diverse views and create communication enclaves whose walls are penetrated only by welcome, like-minded others. The result of deliberative enclaves can be ‘group polarisation’ (Sunstein 2001), that is, people “move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which the group’s members were originally inclined” (p. 65). Instead of enlightened, public-oriented preferences shaped in the process of deliberation, people may end up with extreme positions on issues. Eventually, the very public sphere foundations of democracy may be eroded, as there remain no shared, overlapping issues people of different convictions would regard as politically relevant to their lives. For both Sunstein and Buchstein, the common ground necessary for a robust public sphere may end up shortchanged for a fragmented, private world ordered by consumer preferences.

The same argument about social fragmentation in a multi-channel media environment had been made before (Gitlin 1998), with speculation that the internet merely fuels the further breaking up of the public sphere into ‘public sphericules’. Furthermore, the same argument has been articulated since in relation to blogs, which are said to increase diversity and partisanship at the same time as “giving new voice and new reach to the extremist strain in American society” (Kline 2005) (p. 22). As discussed above, empirical evidence questions the claim that people discussing political issues online prefer to avoid people with different views and seek out like-minded individuals. In fact, the very lamentation of the rude and harsh “verbal cruelty” (Buchstein 1997) (p. 257) of online discussion refutes the idea that like-minded enclaves are the rule on the internet, or that truly public conversation²⁷ cannot occur in privatised, consumerist online cultures.

The skepticism induced by a perceived social fragmentation may be related less to ICTs than to a particular vision of democracy. The same evidence that prompted Buchstein’s

²⁷ ‘Public’ conversation here is used in the sense Schudson (1997) defines the term. It refers to democratic talk among people with different backgrounds and values, which makes conversation heterogeneous and uncomfortable, possibly charged with hostile emotions.

dark conclusions led others to assert that the internet can actually strengthen deliberative democracy (Gimmler 2001), precisely because the deliberative, public sphere model “places such emphasis on raising issues of social and political sort within a sphere composed of deliberating citizens” (p. 31). Gimmler also objects to Buchstein’s “prejudice” about internet users, who she claims do have the competence and creativity to interact with new technology and deal with its social consequences. In this assertion, Gimmler echoes Thomas Nagel who in his review of *republic.com* criticised Sunstein for underrating the importance of individual freedom in choosing what expression by others one wishes to be exposed to (Nagel 2001).

The limits of inclusion

Despite their – I believe mistaken – condemnation of political discussion on the internet, both Sunstein and Buchstein highlight an important aspect of online political talk that often gets overlooked in the more enthusiastic descriptions of the participatory public sphere ideal of the internet. As participation on the internet becomes increasingly widespread, non-mainstream preferences are bound to be introduced into online discussion. Some of these views and preferences can even be legitimately called undesirable for a working democracy. “Counterhegemonic uses are not an electronic monopoly of the political left” (Warf and Grimes 1997) (p. 269), and the celebrations of the internet as a space for activism can sometimes ignore that. The marginal groups using the internet for campaigning and recruitment include racist, anti-Semitic, revisionist etc. organisations, as well as terrorist groups (Campbell 2006; Conway 2006; Reilly 2006). All of these can and do make their tips for spreading the word online available on their websites to members and supporters.²⁸

Sunstein lists examples of interlinked hate group websites as evidence of the extremist cocoons created on and supported by the internet. Buchstein too refers to neo-Nazis in support

²⁸ As a discussion thread on the website of the Stormfront White Nationalist Community proposes: “It is easy to do this! There are 10,000 forums. If your posts are intelligent and thought-provoking other people on the forums will begin discussing your posts and the play will become very wide again. Any dedicated person can reach tens of thousands of new people with our message each evening if they are disciplined enough to do it!” (<http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=171172&page=2> - last accessed on June 14, 2006).

of his claim that the (German) state is helpless in the face of the reigning “libertarian” regulatory attitude to the internet.²⁹ Buchstein acknowledges that there was “craziness, conspiracy theory, fanaticism” before the internet. But he – and, albeit cautiously, Sunstein too – seems ready to condemn the internet as a harmful technology for democracy for its tendency to nourish these views “more than any other previous media has done” (p. 256).

These authors would apparently prefer to see ‘democratic censorship’ instituted online. They would prefer internet content filtered in a way that would extinguish unsavoury political views from the public sphere. This solution, however, would be difficult to reconcile with the principle of deliberative inclusion. This is an ideal requirement of the public sphere, but even in non-ideal circumstances, the principle needs to be taken seriously. Buchstein and Sunstein issue an important challenge to the participatory public sphere ideal of the internet. Essentially, they claim that the very process of increased participation in the discursive sphere of democracy may prove self-destructing to democratic discourse, and they propose the solution of filtering out extreme and harmful views from online discussion.

I believe they are wrong in both their assessment of the situation concerning ‘cyberhate’ or ‘cyber extremism’ in everyday online political talk and their suggestion that deliberative exclusion is an adequate way of handling it. The suggestion of democratic censorship on the internet as a necessary condition to ensure a space for democratic discussion also questions implicitly the reasonability of internet users. The idea that filtering out ‘extremism’ before it enters the arena of discussion is the only way to ensure the continuation of democratic discussion suggests that hate can be as convincing, if not more convincing, to people as reasoning about the common good. On the other hand, research into the ‘effects’ of encountering online hate content has been limited, but it shows that while the

²⁹ Both the German and the French state became locked into battle over controlling their citizens’ access to internet content related to Nazi emblems, memorabilia, and the denial of the Holocaust. The struggle appeared to be a futile one: for instance, the search engine Google was discovered in 2002 to block neo-Nazi sites in its German and French versions (google.de and google.fr), but the sites continued to be available on google.com.

persuasiveness of White supremacist narratives appears to be effective, it is short lived (Lee and Leets 2002). At the same time, psychologists say the danger lies in indirect or long-term effects. It is true that hateful content can be stumbled on online. A recent research report from the UK found that 9 percent of 9-19-year old daily internet users end up accidentally on a site whose content is hostile to a group of people (Livingstone and Bober 2005). However, people tend to react with revulsion: most Americans who encounter incendiary hate websites “find the beliefs of white supremacist groups morally repugnant” (Lee and Leets 2002), and people in the UK find ‘hateful’ content “offensive” (Livingstone and Bober 2005).

Nonetheless, researchers continue to worry about the effects of harmful content on ‘vulnerable’ groups like children and adolescents despite the “lack of evidence (and lack of research) on harm”³⁰ (Livingstone and Bober 2005). The arguments echo the debates about ‘media effects’, and like that tradition, they can be criticised for defining children negatively as “non-adults”, research subjects regarded as a “strange breed whose failure to match generally middle-class adult norms must be charted and discussed” (Gauntlett 1998). The presumptions that guide the construction of ‘subjects’ are highlighted when the definition of vulnerable groups is extended to political categories like ‘New Europe’. It then becomes possible to express fears that increased internet access in post-communist countries, especially in countries where Schoolnet-type programmes boost access among students, may make citizens of newly democratised countries “fall prey” to the intolerance disseminated online (Glassman 2000). The “hate mongers” in many cases are said to be émigrés, using their cheap Western internet access to target compatriots back in the region, especially the “very impressionable” young (p. 161) who then succumb to such propaganda spread on Usenet, mailing lists, and unmoderated Internet Relay Chat. Citizens of new democracies are thus constructed as ‘non-adult’ newcomers to the free speech regimes of liberal democracy, with

³⁰ It should be noted that it is pornography and/or paedophilia, not hate politics that feature most prominently among the concerns about online content that is possibly harmful to children and adolescents.

governments that fail to protect them from harmful exposure for fears that they may seem to be reverting to Communist censorship.

The idea of an inadequate sense-making and reasoning capacity of political minors underlies much of the discussion about hate speech and the internet. Perhaps the most striking element in these condemnations of the Web is the misconception of the medium itself. The internet is not a monolith; there are many uses and experiences of it, a multitude of creative interpretations of online presence. The internet is part of the fabric of everyday life for those who use it, not a separate entity where cyberhate (or –love, relationships and the like) live a virtual life of their own and transform citizens into publicly dysfunctional individuals. Consequently, objectionable online content cannot be interpreted without the proper contextualisation of it in the lives of citizens. The internet is not a space detached from any connections to ‘real life’ and face to face interaction, it has “rich and complex connections with the contexts in which it is used” (Hine 2000) (p. 64). The fact of the existence of interlinked extremist websites and an audience for these does not translate into the disappearance of the public foundations of democracy. But the fears about the harmful messages circulating online to ‘poison the minds of the lower orders’ (Herzog 1998) resonate with deep-seated anxieties about democratic government.

Many of the anxieties expressed about antidemocratic threats in the new media environment read like reruns of classic debates on democracy dating back to the Enlightenment. Kant’s arguments in “An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’” (1784) for an absolute monarch whose enlightened guidance is needed for a transition to representative democracy were premised on his view of people that are in a state of minority/immaturity/tutelage³¹, understood as an “inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another”. John Stuart Mill’s *Considerations on*

³¹ All three expressions are used in different translations for Kant’s original *Unmündigkeit*.

Representative Government (1861) argued that a people at its early level of advancement needs the rule of an enlightened despot to guarantee the accumulation of the democratic virtues needed for collective self-rule. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) made an eloquent diatribe against mob rule, taking mobs to be people who are driven by "insolent fancies" and acting without "prudence, deliberation, or foresight". And while Burke watched the developments of the French revolution with bewilderment, the factionalism that characterised politics in England made the 18th-century French wary of 'public opinion' characterised by doubtful knowledge and sentiment.

The issue at the heart of contemporary participatory theories of politics or democratic deliberation continues to be how to enable people to accumulate the democratic experience that can transform uninformed, apathetic 'subjects' into proud citizens. One answer is provided by the advocates of 'emancipatory' media use, who are correct in highlighting the importance of media and the proliferation of ICTs in society. The catchy phrase 'smart mobs' (Rheingold 2002) captures the essence of these developments: ICTs enable people to cooperate and organise with speed, ease, and efficiency like never before. However, there is still a difference between 'mobs' and ideal publics, and communication technology is not restricted to uses that serve to strengthen democracy. "The impacts of smart mob technology already appear to be both beneficial and destructive", says Rheingold, adding that it is "used by some of its earliest adopters to support democracy and by others to coordinate terrorist attacks".

In summary, I argue that the 'impact' of ICTs depends on how people end up using them. Technologies alone cannot generate democratic virtues, but arguably in established democracies there is an accumulation of democratic virtues that can be relied on by the time ICTs become embedded in people's everyday lives. However, the same could not be said of

newly democratised countries – hence the anxieties expressed about postcommunist vulnerabilities to ‘cyber hate’ (Glassman 2000). ‘Democracy’ and the ‘internet’ are concepts that are often used universally, but the relationship between them can be best approached from an exploration of specific democratic political contexts and online practices. In the next chapters, I am going to focus on discursive engagement on the internet in the context of a “third-wave” democracy (Huntington 1991), the Republic of Hungary. The country was chosen because of my familiarity with it, but also because of its mixed heritage of democratic and dictatorial rule and its understanding of itself as a country balancing on the border of East and West, constantly “ferrying” between the two.

CHAPTER III: DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN THE CONTEXT OF HUNGARY

Political flux is favourable to studying conceptions and theories of democracy as they are constructed and made sense of in a context of change and transformation. The fewer the aspects of public life whose meaning is established (and from then on taken for granted) consensually, the more vigorously they are contested. The preferable way of political contestation in democracies is through discussion, and Hungary is no different in this sense. At the same time, the deliberative potential of these discussions is less certain.

Post-dictatorship and deliberation

1989 is the point zero of contemporary Hungarian democracy, a constant point of reference for political, social, and cultural analysis. Most interpretations of Hungary's transition from Communist rule to democracy highlight that it was a laudably peaceful and negotiated process. However, it was not a deliberative one. The 'roundtable' talks between the incumbent Communist government and the Opposition Round Table that led up to the first free elections in 1990 included a series of give and take, armwrestling, tradeoffs, and compromise, tactics that most theorists of deliberative democracy consider to be the opposite of deliberation. The purpose of the talks was the preliminary agreement on the conditions for establishing a democratic institutional framework, starting with free elections and competitive representation, and heavy bargaining was needed to achieve that.

It could also be argued that bargaining and especially negotiation may not be as alien to a deliberative approach as they first seem. Both can contribute to a clarification of interests, and they could be included in a broadly understood process of deliberation (Mansbridge 2005). In the round table bargaining and negotiations, however, the individual interests of the different opposition groups had to be bracketed rather than clarified. Under the conditions of non-democracy and uncertainty about the outcome, the opposition had to present a united

front to make their demands known to the Communists, even if it was clear and became increasingly so that the opposition was a multi-party bloc with divergent political views (Haraszti 1998). The formal transition, however, signalled only the beginning of the longer and more complex processes of democratic transformation. The differences of political interests that had been bracketed for the scripting of the transition resurfaced openly before the first freely elected Conservative coalition government, headed by the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) was set up. They resulted in an escalation of political conflict between the government and the opposition, producing such highly visible and symbolic clashes as the ‘media war’ of the early 1990s (Bajomi-Lázár 2001).

A ‘deliberative deficit’

Hungarian social scientists regularly lament the quality of public political debates. Debates are seen to be driven by factionalism, emotionally charged, focused not on specific issues but symbolic matters (Dombrádi 2003), and “extremely egocentric and success oriented” (p. 55). Party political squabbling is said to pose problems for the whole of the public sphere because public debate has essentially become conflated with party discourses (Hankiss 2005). Independent assessment and alternative discourse could normatively be expected from a free press, but the Hungarian media follow a path of partisanship instead of professionalised, objective norms (Ádám and Mink 2005). The supply of media content and the choices of consumers jointly create a media space where there are no guarantees of access to balanced, objective, fair political reporting (Gazsó 2005). Close ties between the media and politics are often interpreted as a postcommunist signature, although the problem is perhaps better understood as a structural matter of coping with the heritage of dictatorship, regardless of ideological colouring. The first 15 years of the media in newly democratised Greece and Spain were also dominated by the “partisan political control of radio and television and the

overpoliticisation of the press” (Papatheodorou and Machin 2003) (p. 31), and political elites continue to be anxious to influence political reporting, just as they do in Hungary.

Another formerly significant source of independent, critical thinking, ‘intelligentsia’ discourse too has lost its ability to produce alternative approaches to public life. The debates and discussions of artists and intellectuals once helped create a ‘second public sphere’ (*második nyilvánosság*) as an alternative to the censored Communist one. Legal but marginal literary and science journals were, to varying degrees, allowed to publish materials critical of the Communist regime from the 1970s; while the illegal samizdat press managed to reach a small but important audience. The intelligentsia was also celebrated as the most prominent actor in the transformation of Eastern Europe (Kennedy 1992). As early as two years into the new Hungarian democracy, however, Hungarian sociologists were lamenting the loss of the sovereignty of intellectual discourse: “Today, discourse about power uses the same words that power/authority itself does” (Becskeházi and Kuczsi 1992)³². The changing character and role of intellectual discourse could be attributed to the changing role of the ‘intelligentsia’ itself. The leadership of the new political parties was in many cases constituted by dissident intellectuals, which created personal equivalences between politics and the intelligentsia. On the other hand, the unique mixture of culture, arts, and critical social analysis that characterised the journals of the counter-public sphere created by intellectuals³³ was to change inevitably as democracy and a market economy enabled professionalisation also in the social sciences (Kaposi 2002).

One of the persistent charges levelled at the dominance of factional political discussions is that since 1990 they have prevented the creation of a national political community, increasing the ‘democratic deficit’ and turning people off politics. In other words, political freedom has resulted in constant public reminders of the persistence of moral

³² All quotes from Hungarian articles are my translation.

³³ Some enclaves of this public sphere remain, though; e.g. *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature] is a weekly that continues to publish social and political analysis alongside literary pieces.

disagreement. The public domain, which under Communist rule was dominated by a forced – and strictly enforced – unity, became a contested political ground. This in itself could be seen as a desirable development, with the opportunity to articulate and justify claims under the conditions of publicity and accountability becoming the norm of Hungarian politics.

However, the declining popularity of Parliament between 1988 and 1998 indicates that “Hungarian public opinion has not been able to come to terms with and value as a fundamental element of democracy the forum of party political debates and conflicts that are often seen as feuding” (Husz 1998) (p. 827). Not recognising public contestation as integral to liberal democracy is at least in part attributable to the heritage of political socialisation under the soft dictatorship of the late 1960s through the 1980s. Avoiding conflict was essential to that socialisation (Szabó 1991), while politics was presented as an alien phenomenon that imposes unnecessary conflicts on people’s lives instead of relying on pragmatism and expertise to solve public issues.

Historical dis-closures

In a country with a relatively small and open market economy and broad consensus among the political elites about the desirability of European Union membership, the reemerging political debates have often become focused on history. The events of history, especially when they form a series of severely disruptive, traumatic events like they did in the 20th century, are constitutive elements of personal identity, and judgements about historical figures form part of the political identities of voters (Karácsony 2005). Democracy granted the freedom for historical experiences that had been accumulated as private stories told within the family, often in opposition to the official stories of Communism, to become public. The emblematic moment of the regime change was provided by the public funeral, or reburial of Imre Nagy, at once a historical figure as prime minister during the 1956 revolution and a “national symbol (...) who was so intimately intertwined with Hungarian identity” (Benziger

2001) (p. 160). The funeral was a genuine ritual act, enabling a controlled interaction between the last Communist government and the aspiring political opposition (Ittész 2005) with the full participation of the public, around 300,000 of whom turned up at the catafalque. The funeral was also televised live, creating a ritual as a media event (Dayan and Katz 1992) for the whole population.

But the reburial was the last time during and since the transition to serve as a ritual of unity. In the public domain, history ever since has tended to evoke divisive narratives, (Dombrádi 2003), including the discussions about Nagy himself. The reasons for this are complex, and history is but one contested political ground in contemporary Hungarian democracy. I would argue though that among the reasons for the unrelenting contestation, not just of history but also current politics, is the absence of a deliberative closure. By deliberative closure I mean a shared understanding that emerges as the outcome of a process where disagreeing parties could state their claims under the principles of freedom, reciprocity, accountability, and publicity. A shared understanding does not necessarily imply a convergence of views, it may suffice to establish a sense of mutual respect and recognition through public deliberation. Even in the absence of consensus, that should provide sufficient ground for 'moving on' from the traumas of the past on the strength of the democratic outcome achieved. Judging by the survival of sometimes bitter disagreements that regularly lead journalists, academics, and citizens to bemoan the state of division in not only national politics but also everyday life, the Hungarian approaches taken to transitional justice have not achieved this. Furthermore, it soon became clear after 1990 that the neuralgic points in historical and cultural memory go back to the times preceding Communism and include Nazism and the Holocaust, as well as, to a lesser degree, the peace treaty of World War I that had lost the country two-thirds of its territories.

Admittedly, deliberative closure is rare in any new democracy, but it is not unknown; the best example for it is South Africa, although truth commissions have also been set up in Peru, Greensboro USA, and elsewhere to help the transition to democracy. South African reconciliation hinged on “telling the ‘untold’, that is, violence beyond description as well as violence not told, a double function (to make the description possible and real) to be fulfilled by the Commission in the spirit of (...)‘I am because you are’. [This] underscores the foundational task of ‘telling’ the story of apartheid so that, in the process of narration, amnesty may be granted and the nation reconciled with her past, thus ‘bridging’ a divided citizenry with a state of [sameness of intent]” (Salazar 2004) (pp. 150-51). It is the public memory of the nondemocratic regime that emerges from the accounts of both the victims and the perpetrators, the oppressed and the oppressors who, through this process, manage to transform themselves into a citizenry.

Such an outcome, however, is dependent on the existence of arenas of deliberation that are largely absent from Hungary’s democracy. Indeed, the term ‘deliberation’ has no equivalent Hungarian version. The linguistic hiatus could be interpreted as an indication of the alienness of the concept to Hungarian political culture. Nevertheless, the lack of terminology may not necessarily mean deliberativeness is absent from all practices of public discourse. In the next section I am going to assess the arenas of discursive engagement and political participation in Hungary from the perspective of public deliberation.

Discursive arenas and political participation in Hungary

The weakness or inadequate conduct of several potential forums of public deliberation (including the media or parliamentary debates) can make it harder for citizens to construct their understandings of democracy. The following excerpt from a contemporary Hungarian play, *Portugál* (Egressy 1997) illustrates the difficulties involved. The play was written in

1998, two parliamentary terms after the regime change, and it is still enjoying a popular run in a Budapest theatre. The setting is a small Hungarian village where characters seem to be going through the repetitious motions of their lives without much change. The dialogue³⁴ occurs early on in the play between the Publican, owner of the village watering hole, and Radish, a regular at the place:

Radish (to Publican) Tell me now, Lajos bátyám! Will there be a call for tender, or will there be not?

Publican He wants five litres per week. Then there won't be.

Radish Why?

Publican I'm telling you, he wants five litres per week. Then there won't be.

Radish What?

Publican A tender.

Radish Since he became mayor, he can be talked to. They say he was a rare bad beast when he was party secretary³⁵.

Publican Yeah. This is different now. It's democracy.

Radish Democracy. Why, what was it before?

Publican The same. But the people's.

Radish People's what?

Publican A people's democracy. It was a people's democracy until then.

Radish Why, what do we have now?

Publican Democracy.

Radish And then?

Publican That was a people's democracy, this one's plain. Don't you get it?

³⁴ The text is my own translation.

³⁵ 'Party secretary' refers to the local leader of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party.

Radish I do. Tell you honest, I like politics. I like talking about it. So, plain democracy. Now. That's why he can be talked to.

Publican Yeah. That's what democracy does. The plain one.

Radish It does. And it gets women consciousness.

The play makes it clear that democracy is still a difficult concept to grasp for some citizens, especially people from lower socio-economic status (Radish is an ex-policeman who was dismissed from the force for brutality). On the other hand, the Publican's character seems to be learning democracy by doing it. He takes advantage of the increased flexibility that characterises the relationship of citizens and their political leaders in a democracy. Political leadership in this case includes both continuity and change, rather than a radical break with the past. Leadership has not changed hands, as the old party secretary is now mayor, but under a democratic institutional setup, it is more open to accommodating citizen preferences. The language shared by citizen and elected leader, though, is one of corruption, and the mutually beneficial arrangement under democracy involves bribing the mayor for the renewal of the pub's licence.

What the excerpt shows is that, in the late 1990s, it is still a culturally relevant practice to pepper literary works with political reflections. Such elements of continuity between communist and postcommunist times are not limited to the arts either; the interpretive practices of history or culture can also appear in social science texts, as the traditions of 'intelligentsia' discourse would encourage. To this day, this lends an interesting polyphony to Hungarian political science³⁶ analyses of democratic development. At the same time, the polyphony also makes it more difficult to assess the state of political participation.

³⁶ Political science as an academic discipline did not exist under communism. In the Hungarian context, it was after 1990 that the first political science departments were formed, often relying on the transformation of "scientific socialism" departments.

The excerpt from the play quoted above is not a transcript of a conversation that took place at a village pub, it is an artistic (re)creation that also contains elements of mockery directed at the bumpkins who are incapable of a sophisticated appreciation of their political emancipation. Native social science assessments of the Hungarian public sphere that had been, at least at some point, inspired by ‘intellectual’ modes of thinking may inadvertently revert to similar elitist patterns of thinking. The success of the negotiated transition of 1989 can make it seem irrelevant that the public did not play a part in it, that the political revolution was “itself derived from the interactions of [the] intelligentsia with Party officials, in typically intellectual forms: conferences and publications”. The intelligentsia originally enjoyed a “hegemony in the construction of Hungarian civil society” (Kennedy 1992) (p. 25), which may go some way also towards explaining why large-scale civil society participation failed to emerge after the transition.

Associational life and civic participation

Civil society in postcommunist countries is generally recognised to be weak (Howard 2002), although there are differences among the individual countries. Hungary presents something of an anomaly for the theoretical expectations that, acknowledging the differences among postcommunist countries, expect democratic participation to be higher in socioeconomically more developed countries (Barnes 2004). Survey research from the mid-1990s showed high acceptance and tolerance for even non-traditional forms of political participation, as well as high potential willingness to participate (Körösenyi 1997). However, the positive judgements do not necessarily translate into actual participatory practice. Standard assessments of citizen participation in Hungary’s public life state that it remains limited, despite the legal guarantees that ensure numerous opportunities of participation for citizens and associations on both the national and local level. Instead of self-reliance, citizens appear to be expecting political elites and government agencies to settle their issues and solve

their problems (Kákai 2004). Thus for example in 2002, when the right-of-center coalition lost the elections, the main right-wing party's leaders issued a call to their deeply disappointed voters to form 'civic circles'. A large-scale participatory movement of forming 'civic circles' was started, but the movement was criticised for being a top-down initiative, started and controlled by a political party (Ádám and Mink 2005).

Low participation in Hungary is often attributed to historical upheavals that repeatedly interrupted democratic development, teaching people to rely on top-down changes instead of grassroots organisation and association (Nizák and Péterfi 2005). In other words, the historical experiences of Hungarians prevented citizens from enjoying the benefits of the transformative and educational effects of participation. Data on political participation seem to support this conclusion. Average turnout at the last two elections since 1996 was 64,4 percent, which fits into the patterns of new EU member countries but falls about 10 percent behind old member states (Angelusz and Tardos 2005). Hungary is also lagging behind old EU countries in both formal and informal participation: membership in political, professional, and voluntary organisations is lower, as are the levels of working for political organisations, displaying political symbols, signing petitions, or attending street demonstrations (Angelusz and Tardos 2005). Furthermore, Hungarians are also said to be less active in areas of participation that "demand the least effort", including reading the political pages of newspapers and having political discussions (Simon n.d.). Unlike Simon claims, political discussion – as the previous chapters argue – can indeed be demanding, at least psychologically.

Discussion networks

Simon's claim also contradicts the results of a cross-national survey from 1995 that found Hungary to have the highest percentage of people with politically relevant extensive networks. Hungarians had broad and politicised networks, 'politicised' meaning remarkably

frequent political discussion taking place in the networks (Gibson 2003, quoted in (Lup 2006a). Data from a national survey in 2003 also show that Hungarians discuss politics with almost equal likelihood with their five important alters (Lup 2006a). Nor is political discussion limited to like-minded individuals. Although the likelihood of discussing politics drops from around 80 percent with alters who have similar political views to just under 57 percent on average with alters whose political preferences differ, this still means frequent political discussion. This finding also sheds an interesting light on statements about the population's intolerance for people with different political affiliation (Hankiss 2005). The fact of frequent political discussion in both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of important alters indicates an acceptance of political differences as inevitable under conditions of high polarisation. It could also be a sign of "truly public", that is uncomfortable and even threatening conversation (Schudson 1997) occurring in 'safe' social settings.

All discussions of the active/passive public involve acts of construction, and judgements about the engaged/disengaged postcommunist citizen are very much a function of how engagement is conceived. "Regression into the family" (Hankiss 2005), that is the tendency of people to withdraw into the private sphere of the home and not care about the world outside has been identified as a sign of a "new infantilism of social and political irresponsibility" flourishing in Hungary (p. 498). But the home can turn out to be one of the most important spheres for making sense about public issues. This realisation has led researchers to measure the intensity of political socialisation within the family by the frequency with which people are exposed to political discussion at home (Karácsony 2005). Political discussion with spouses, most of which occurs in the home, has also been found to influence electoral participation (Lup 2006b).

Everyday political talk outside the home is often described as *kocsmai politizálás*, or 'pub politicking'. It is a colloquial expression for the phenomenon of widespread political

discussion in everyday situations, but it also carries negative connotations. Pubs are a dubious scene of association. Even though drinking can be a lifeblood of conviviality and an equalising force to facilitate the mixing of socially heterogeneous companies, it can also make pubs riotous hubs of sociality. The consumption of copious amounts of liquor is de rigeur in a pub, and the result is the loosening of social norms and the loosening of tongues. This produces a relaxed, easy flow of conversation, where discussions need not observe the rules and norms of public debate, including soundness or consistency of positions. When the concept of pub politicking is extended beyond the confines of the pub, it is with these negative connotations. Pub politicking becomes a metaphor for poor-quality discussion where unsound views and opinions can be expressed irresponsibly and without much risk of retaliation. As a metaphor, it is used widely to label political talk as unworthy of public attention, which – together with its amorphous manifestations – is probably the reason why no systematic exploration of this practice exists.

Ignoring the home or the spheres of casual everyday encounters as politically relevant entities is not restricted to the postcommunist context. Some of the democratic theoretical debates outlined in Chapter 1 tackle precisely such matters; while the sociological preference for institutions and institutional differences as objects of study instead of a focus on the everyday interactions of the public is a familiar phenomenon the world over. Institutions are especially intriguing fields of inquiry when they are created anew, like they were in the transformation of communist regimes. However, there are social patterns that are “*more solid*”³⁷ than the analysis of institutions imply: “the public embodies socially patterned, enduring methods of making meaning together that are often just as stable and patterned as the objects [called] ‘institutions’” (Eliasoph 2004) (p. 297). It is of course precisely the endurance of the social patterns of Hungarian citizens’ meaning making that is blamed for

³⁷ Emphasis in the original.

hindering the emergence of the sort of robust civil society activity envisioned by the architects of the regime change.

Mediated participatory arenas

The focus on traditionally conceived participation has also led to rejections of some genuinely new public arenas for participation that emerged after 1990. The launching of the two terrestrial commercial television channels in 1997 induced processes of mediatization, and the production of Hungarian cultural and political traditions now occurs increasingly in the public sphere supported and maintained by popular media (Csigó 2005). But while political scientists recognise the significance of mediated politics and analyse political leaders' communication strategies in terms of their performances in the media (Kiss and Rigó 2006), they tend not to give similar attention to the arenas of popular participation in the same media spheres. New television genres like talk shows with everyday guests were introduced in the media, but these shows have met with contempt from many observers. The shows were labelled 'banal' for dealing with the everyday concerns of everyday people, consciously aiming to address the widest possible audience. In a sense, the new talk shows were condemned for their "cultural democratism", that is for opening up the media to people and discourses outside the traditional public spheres dominated by the political, media, and cultural elites (Császi 2005; Jenei 2005). On the other hand, the political significance of popular media was recognised in the three seasons of *Megasztár* (the Hungarian version of *Pop/American Idol*) as audiences voted winner first an overweight young woman, then a young Roma man, and finally a young ethnic Hungarian woman from Serbia. Because in December 2004, a referendum on devising a plan for granting citizenship for ethnic Hungarians living outside the country failed to get a result, the *Megasztár* votes were widely understood as symbolic gestures of recognition and integration of marginal or underprivileged groups into the public sphere of popular media. It was also on such grounds that the

appearance of a Roma character in a popular soap opera was analysed by researchers (Bernáth and Messing 2001).

At the same time, even if everyday political discussion and participation in popular media arenas are acknowledged as part of the deliberative system, it remains unclear how the resources generated there could be channelled into the process of democratic decision making.

ICTs and politics in Hungary

Data on existing forms of participation in Hungary suggest that rigidity and lack of openness in the party system and the media make participatory opportunities difficult and costly (Ádám and Mink 2005). On the other hand, the promise of ICTs is that they are capable of lowering the costs of participation. The question then is, are there signs that indicate ICTs helping to revitalise participation, opening up new channels of communication between citizens and government, or are the elitist features of the Hungarian public sphere shaping the democratic uses of communication technologies?

The broadcasting model

Hungarian governments have on occasion experimented with using ‘old’ and ‘new’ technologies to run citizen consultations on different issues. For example, in January 2004 the Ministry of Finance set up a toll-free number, a moderated discussion forum on the ministry’s website, and an e-mail address to invite citizen suggestions and ideas on how to lower budget expenditure³⁸. A summary of the suggestions was announced less than a month later at a press conference, but it is unclear if citizen ideas were incorporated into the planning of the budget (and in April 2005 a new minister was appointed). In another attempt at more direct communication with citizens, the Ministry of Health, Social and Family Issues also set up a toll-free telephone number. The aim of the initiative was to invite proposals on how to

³⁸ The press release announcing the toll-free number is available at <https://www.magyarorszag.hu/kozigazgatas/sajtokozelemenyek/zoldszamkozelemenye20040115.html> - last accessed June 24, 2006.

improve public health care, and between February and June, the minister himself answered calls from the public for two hours each month. Initially, public interest in the opportunity to contact the minister was so high that during the first two sessions the telephone system of the ministry crashed. The minister was also bringing up the issues that were raised in the phone conversations at the ministry staff meetings. However, the majority of the calls were focused on complaints about the health services instead of specific suggestions for improvement, although some callers were successful in pointing out systemic problems. According to his press secretary who accompanied him to the live phone sessions, by the end the minister considered the chats with the public “a waste of time”, and even if he found a suggestion worthy of discussion, the ministry’s bureaucrats “sabotaged” any practical steps (Tóth 2006).

In the absence of systematic research into the ministerial consultations it is difficult to say what impact, if any, they may have had. But they highlight the willingness of at least some political leaders to open up channels of more direct communication with citizens, and in the case of the health consultations, the willingness of citizens to make use of the communicative opportunity. The reliance on the ‘old’ technology of the telephone in the consultations also indicates that the internet is not the primary medium of communication between citizens and the government. This reflects the significance of the internet on both the supply and demand sides. There are differences in the survey data available about internet use, but on the whole it can be said that internet penetration is not very high: in 2005 15-19 percent of households had access to the internet, and 25-35 percent of people were internet users (ITTK 2006). On the other hand, ‘information society’ projects in Hungary have given priority to e-government, with minimal attention given to e-participation or e-democracy. The Information Society Research Institute (ITTK) reports no e-democracy initiatives for the year 2005, it simply quotes survey data showing that while nearly one-fifth of respondents believe the internet can help people understand politics better, two-thirds of respondents do not feel at

all that people like them may have an impact on politics if they use the internet (ITTK 2005-2006). The sense of efficacy is, however, stronger among internet users, 60-80 percent of whom feel that the internet increases political influence, together with the chance of 'having a say in the work of government' and 'increasing the attention of public officials'. Similarly, researchers found the internet to be one of the most important explanatory factors for engaging in such forms of political participation as signing letters of protest or petitions, or sending SMSs to polls on television programmes (Angelusz, Fábián, and Tardos 2005).

At a cursory glance, government websites dedicated to e-democracy confirm the primacy of the 'modernisation', 'service delivery' e-government approach. Under the heading of 'e-democracy news', the Ministry of Informatics and Communications offers a page³⁹ that broadcasts news items about online government and business services from Hungary and abroad. Similarly, the 'e-democracy' web page of the e-Hungary governmental portal declares that "recordings of the public appearances of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány can be downloaded from this site"⁴⁰. The broadcasting model of communication was also found to dominate local government portals: based on a 2003 content analysis of thirteen municipal websites, researchers concluded that municipalities seem to be content with using the internet as some kind of message board for posting announcements (Kiss and Boda 2005). The websites analysed were chosen for being among the most developed ones in the pool of the 220 local government portals functioning across the country. In terms of interactive features, discussion forums elements were the most popular, with ten out of the thirteen sites offering this option. On the whole, however, the "elitist or paternalistic attitude" (p. 106) of political institutions were found to prevent them from making an effort to get citizens involved through interactive uses of the internet.

³⁹ <http://www.ihm.gov.hu/hirek/edemokracia> - last accessed June 20, 2006.

⁴⁰ <http://www.emagyarorszag.hu/edemokracia/> - last accessed June 20, 2006.

Similar findings were reported about the websites of Hungary's political parties and NGOs. Even though some parties made efforts to extend their campaign communication to the internet during the 2002 elections, the rules and traditions of offline campaigning continued to dominate party presence online. In the absence of a change in the parties' approach to the internet, their websites remained large 'bulletin boards' (Dányi 2002) with predominantly top-down modes of communication (Kiss and Boda 2005). Research into NGO websites also concluded that Hungarian civil society organisations tend to limit their online presence to using a new platform to "introduce themselves", that is produce "static" displays of information about their activities (Pintér 2005). Even the websites of environmental NGOs, which are the best organised and most active among social movements in Hungary, were found to lack innovative solutions and creative ideas that would exploit the potential of the internet (Kiss and Boda 2005).

ICTs at the grassroots

Despite the dominance of the broadcasting model in online communication, ICTs are increasingly important for organising cooperation within organisations and mobilising supporters. E-mail and text messaging were found to be important tools of mobilisation for environmental NGO activism (Sükösd 2005; Vay 2005). During the 2002 elections, when mobilisation of voters was essential because of the closeness of the race between the two main political camps, e-mail and text messaging became a crucial feature of the campaign (Mink 2002; Sükösd and Dányi 2003). Sükösd and Dányi estimate the number of SMSs sent daily between the two rounds of the 2002 elections to have been 4-5 million every day, which is comparable to SMS traffic on major holidays like Mothers' Day. During the campaign, viral marketing and black propaganda tools were used alongside political humour and spam in the messages that were circulated (Sükösd and Dányi 2003).

The overall underutilisation of technological affordances in many websites thus does not mean that no creative online initiatives exist to help democratic participation. Research into these has been sporadic, and even less is known about how or whether these projects are contributing to democratic development, but it is important to note at least some examples of them. The Hungarian internet offers national language versions of such initiatives as Indymedia⁴¹ or Wikipedia⁴². Online communities organised around a wide range of issues use virtual spaces not only to organise their cultural life but also to represent their interests, organise politically, and communicate among members (Vályi 2004). Flash mob actions in Budapest have been coordinated online since August 2003, and blogging is a growing phenomenon. Several candidates took up blogging in the 2006 spring election campaign, including the prime minister. His blog supplies regular updates on his 'private' thoughts on events, his commentary on developments, and details of the human interest aspects of life in politics⁴³. The blog was created in January 2006, during the campaign that won a reelection for the government coalition headed by the blogging Prime Minister Gyurcsány. According to the web auditing agency Medián⁴⁴, in April 2006 the blog attracted 69,759 visitors, and its postings sometimes supply material for the news media. In the absence of research into the blog or other political blogs, however, it is impossible to tell what impact they may have had on the campaign or what role they continue to play in public communication.

Somewhat more is known about another party political online initiative. In 2001, an innovative method of recruitment was introduced by the liberal party SZDSZ: they established Netpárt (Net Party), an internet-based party organisation inspired by ideas of

⁴¹ <http://www.indymedia.hu/>

⁴² The Hungarian Wikipedia was started in July 2003, currently it has over 34,000 entries. Available at <http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kezd%C5%91lap>.

⁴³ <http://blog.amoba.hu/blog-2.php?oid=T01a2a7e3a104d9863919db4b3afc660>. Posting titles include "How lonely is a prime minister?", "We had to bring Anna back from the summer camp", "I am saying goodbye to the ministers today", "I do not wish to be the leader of the Left", "We did not make it to the movies", "Today is our tenth wedding anniversary", "Sometimes it's funny to read political newspapers", "The Socialist Party won, Hungary won", "I first asked Tony Blair to visit Hungary at the end of October", etc.

⁴⁴ <http://www.webaudit.hu/index.php?content=552> - last accessed on June 29, 2006.

“digital democracy” (Magyar 2001). Citizens could register and become members of the online party group as well as the offline organisation. In early 2003, membership was around 1600, and the online party organisation was working in many ways like a community organised primarily around internal discussion forums for members across the country. On a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 equalled ‘very suitable’ and 1 ‘not suitable at all’, members surveyed in a 2002-03 research assigned an average of 4.2 to the statement that Netpárt was suitable for meeting like-minded people (Galács n.d.). In the same survey, the suitability of the organisation for ‘finding information about topical events’ got 3.9; ‘more efficient organising’ 3.8; ‘participation in quality political discussion’ 3.7. ‘Communicating with SZDSZ leaders’ and ‘having more say in SZDSZ politics’ got 2.8 and 2.6, which may also indicate the offline party’s difficulties in incorporating the online group into the party hierarchy. Eventually, the apparent lack of interest from the offline party leadership, coupled with differences of opinion among members led to the gradual disintegration of the Net Party.⁴⁵

Another initiative that was temporarily disabled by differences of opinion among founding members but managed to continue its operation is the online petitioning website peticio.hu. The site is a citizen initiative, it was started in December 2003 by a group of people who wanted to create the opportunity for online petitioning on the Hungarian web based on foreign ‘petition clearinghouse’ sites like petitionsite.com or petitiononline.com. Independence from state and market, neutrality, democratic equality for association members, and freedom from either political or commercial domination for participants were the principles peticio.hu wished to be operating on. Without reverting to the language of public sphere theory, the people behind the site attempted to create an online space that approximated that ideal.

⁴⁵ These statements are based on participant observation: I registered for membership in 2001 and continued to visit the discussions for over a year. Further information about the organisation was made publicly available by a former member who, upon quitting the party, discussed its affairs on popular internet discussion forums.

However, tensions within the website team surfaced around two interlinked issues: the handling of content (petitions) the users supplied, and the positioning of the site in relation to the decision-makers addressed by the petitions. The struggle between the concerns for maintaining the independence and neutrality of the site and the desire to influence decision-makers lends itself to be read as a conflict between the core principles of efficacy (understood as the belief that becoming involved in online petitioning is likely to be effective or satisfying) and liberty (Kaposi 2005). In order to target established political institutions or corporate organisations, the petitions would need to be tailored to the rules and accepted norms of the target institutions. Consequently, freedom of expression would need to be restrained in the service of efficacy. And while that move was acceptable, even desirable for some, it was an abhorrent thought for others.

The conflict within the association seems to have been inevitable, given the potential incompatibility of efficacy and liberty in this context. It is a challenge for all citizen-led, ground-up initiatives to strike the right balance between closeness and distance in relation to power holders (Coleman 2005a). The distance is necessary for the free communication among citizens, while the closeness is needed to make participants feel that their action can be effective. The balance between the two may not be easy to find, and in this case it was made even more difficult by the new media environment and the political legacy of the country. From the point of efficacy, public participation on the internet is still easier to dismiss because of credibility issues emerging from the relative anonymity online. From the point of liberty, the legacy of the conflation of the state and the public sphere in the communist era can make civic initiatives especially anxious not to get too close to political office-holders. These factors helped polarise the association whose members turned out to have different hierarchies of democratic principles.

Despite the turmoils in the association, launching the project proved to be an exercise in political education for the website team. The democratic ideals held by the founding members became crystallised during the conflicts that emerged in the course of running the site. The continuing arguments about the boundaries of freedom of expression and the strategies enabling efficacy helped the members of the association to develop and strengthen their individual democratic value systems. In the context of a new democracy like Hungary, such contention is an integral part of the political learning process.

The politics of online discussion

The story of *peticio.hu* also illustrates vividly the problems problem-solving conversation can pose for communities. Political issues in online conversations make discussion especially vulnerable to the surfacing of hostility, and they tend to polarise regular discussants who vent their differences in flaming (Lee 2005). Perceived potential threats to civility may have been among the reasons why in the early days of Hungarian internet communities, political discussion was not welcome in online conversation forums (Bodoky and Dányi 2005). In 1995, “taking political stands was still considered improper”, except on forums created specifically for this purpose; therefore “users abstained from it, and the forum participant or mailing list member who announced his political views was usually ostracised” (p. 153). This was the ruling norm on the first and to this day largest Hungarian online group of conversation forums, *Internetto* (which eventually became part of *Index*, one of Hungary’s top three portals), where political discussion was first allowed in 1996 when it became clear that there was considerable user demand for it. Political discussion on *Internetto* was initially organised around a specific question, posted by the discussion administrator each week and inviting comments from registered users of the site. The discussion was moderated by the administrator who prescreened messages sent in by anonymous users. The popularity of the

discussion features led Internetto to develop a discussion software and introduce *Törzsasztal*, a separate forum option to the portal in 1997.

The choice of the name for the forum – itself the first major online community on the Hungarian internet (Gelléri 2000; Gelléri 2001) – is highly symbolic. ‘Törzsasztal’ means a table maintained for regular clients in a coffeehouse or restaurant. The appearance of this concept on the internet suggests that members of the emerging online community perceived their discussions to be related to the time-honoured practices of coffeehouse culture. Like elsewhere in Europe, coffeehouses in Hungary from the 19th century into the first decades of the 20th were a quintessentially urban/metropolitan and bourgeois/middle-class institution, while also frequented by bohemian crowds of artists and writers (Gyáni 1996). Part of the popularity of the coffeehouse was rooted in the increased significance of a type of knowledge that was based on the need to be well-informed, which need was met by the flourishing metropolitan press. Coffeehouses served as the scenes of “authentically bourgeois sociability” (Gyáni 1996) by providing access to newspapers and to coffee, itself considered to be a drink that, unlike alcohol, inspires alertness and rational thinking. The social and political significance of coffeehouses in Hungary⁴⁶ is also indicated by the fact that they were closed down after World War II, to be renovated and reopened after the collapse of communism. This complex historical and cultural tradition is evoked when the online community names itself ‘törzsasztal’. The initial community was nonpolitical in the themes they were discussing, but ‘Politics’ (*Politika*) was later added to it as a subchapter, thus launching the political discussion forum that has served as the scene of the most fierce political debates ever since (Bodoky and Dányi 2005).

Arguably, the evolution of the Internetto-Index discussion forum has also had a lasting impact on Hungary’s online political discussion culture. By virtue of being the first open

⁴⁶ By 1912, there were 322 coffeehouses listed in Budapest (source: *Budapesti Negyed*, 1996/2-3), while the city in 1910 had a population of 880,000 (source: *Budapesti Negyed*, 1998/4).

discussion space of its kind in the country, the forum managed to shape the terms for thinking about online political discussion. Rival attempts to establish internet discussion forums connected to major portals like origo or Gondola have tended to follow the technical format of Internetto-Index, while the culture of its online discussion continued to be a significant point of reference. The success of the discussion forum format can also be attributed to the embeddedness of political talk in everyday culture in Hungary. The broad and politicised networks of Hungarians (Lup 2006a) were crucial in making the e-mail and SMS campaign strategies of 2002 work. During that campaign, developments were also discussed vigorously in everyday settings including homes, workplaces, schools, and public spaces, all of which were said to be “torn by political discussion” (Sükösd and Dányi 2003). It was also on popular demand that political discussion spaces were introduced to the first online community, indicating the participants’ desire to transfer their everyday participatory practices to the new social environment of the internet.

Research into the Politika forum of Index has attempted to analyse discussions from the perspective of how deliberative they are (Kiss n.d.; Kiss and Boda 2005). Modelled on international research on Usenet discussions, Kiss and Boda analysed select discussion threads or topics for the relationship of messages to the opening message, the relevance of postings, stability of discussion, style of messages, and opinion change. They concluded that while political forums did not seem appropriate for achieving consensus, participants were willing to make relevant and reasoned contributions to the discussion. Obscenity and ad hominem remarks are frequent, but they do not prevent the continuation of the discussion. Furthermore, the forum was found to have a great degree of autonomy sustained by the traditions of the online community. The agenda of discussion was consistently set by participants instead of merely following cues from political events, and the interpretive schemes appearing on the forum continued to be autonomous from the readily available party

political interpretations even when a political actor, in this case a Socialist MP, initiated discussion.

Kiss and Boda raise the question of what purpose and value discussion forums have for participants who themselves note the general lack of relevance in many postings. In other words, they are asking what sustains the online community in the absence of quality deliberation. Their method of coding discussion topics, measuring the volume of traffic, and counting and classifying topics, however, does not yield answers to this question. Nor does it help clarify the meanings of deliberative democracy in the political cultural context of the Hungarian internet. Finding out about these issues would require a different research approach, one that is more open to the perspectives of the participants.

CHAPTER IV: VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Politika forum, or Polforum as it is often referred to by participants, is a Hungarian discussion forum dedicated to political issues on the internet. It was created in autumn 1998 from the first Hungarian online community of the *Törzsasztal* forum that could no longer contain the traffic of political postings it attracted. Discussion on Politika forum is organised around thematic threads called “topics”, it is to these that participants post their contributions. Participation requires registration, but users only need to provide a working e-mail address to get a password and activate their “nick”. Discussion on the forum is moderated by unpaid volunteers recruited from the pool of active participants. Moderators do not pre-screen messages, rather they patrol and monitor topics and delete postings that break the code of conduct (the “Modus Moderandi”, also composed by a participant on a voluntary basis) of the forum.

Politika forum operates as part of a Hungarian-owned horizontal public portal, Index. Index is among the top five most successful Hungarian portals based on its traffic⁴⁷. However, the online communities are not part of the commercial sections of Index, and they enjoy autonomy in handling their affairs like moderation. The management of the portal has no business strategy for the forums, and as the editor-in-chief of the Index newsroom said, “After a while we stopped developing the forum because we did not even make a penny out of it. We don’t care about it, we have nobody to look after it. To be honest, it’s a mystery for me how it can still work... I don’t really understand what makes the thing survive...” (quoted in (Drótos, Kováts, and Gast 2004), p. 4). Commercial pressure is thus removed from the forum, but it cannot expect major investments to its technological infrastructure, including the software powering the discussions, either.

⁴⁷ Between 2000 and 2005, Index produced a 351% growth in the number of visitors, and a 738% growth in the number of page impressions (Bodoky, Tamás. 2005. A hírportál mint tömegmédiium. *Médiakutató* (nyár).

Research questions and method

The main research question of the dissertation is: Why is Politika forum such a long-running, robust institution? What is it that makes the online forum a prominent site of discussion among diverse and disagreeing elements of the Hungarian polity? The main question is complemented by seeking answers to a set of more specific questions on who participate in the online discussions, what standards and practices they rely on to manage conflict and disagreement, and what role the forum plays in the Hungarian public sphere.

The types of questions I was asking myself, that is questions about what happens when people engage in everyday political discussion on Politika forum, what meanings and interpretations participants on the discussion forum construct for themselves on politics, democracy, and the internet, and how these can be interpreted from a deliberative democratic perspective, led me to an ethnographic approach. I followed ethnography as defined by Hammersley and Atkinson, for whom “ethnography (...) is simply one social research method, albeit a somewhat unusual one, drawing as it does on a wide range of sources of information. The ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1990) (p.2).

Ethnography, as Hine notes, is appealing for its depth of description and its lack of reliance on a priori hypotheses, and it offers the promise of getting closer to understanding the ways in which people interpret the world and organize their lives (Hine 2000) (p.42). For researching interactive online forums, Lori Kendall recommends including participant observation (Kendall 1999). If someone, researcher or citizen, simply wanders to Politika forum and peruses some of its topics (topics being the thematic threads around which discussion is organised), the first thing he is probably going to notice is the harsh tone of the

discussion and the great number of apparently irrelevant contributions, as if one had landed in the middle of the chaotic, ongoing conversations of virtual pub politicking.

If read superficially, these discussions are so far from ideal deliberation that it becomes easy to dismiss the whole forum as irrelevant to politics or democracy, as nothing but a repository of king-size egos and extreme opinions. In fact, one of the recurring views people on the forum express is that Politika forum is like a madhouse, a case study in psychiatric abnormalities, a pub full of drunken brawling, and the like. Taking these statements at face value, and scanning a few discussions may lead to the conclusion that the participants' diagnoses are correct. And yet, there is a fondness in the way they talk about the madness they all share in, they can talk for hours about the forum, to which they keep returning, often for years. How the forum works, what it is like to be discussing politics online with these people, is revealed only if the researcher becomes part of it.

The research on Politika forum lasted about a year and a half, from spring 2002 to the end of 2003. Although I read it occasionally, I was not a participant there prior to starting my research. After a period of lurking, I then registered and started contributing to different topics. With my roughly 500 messages, I was not a particularly prolific contributor, as some say it takes about two days to run the number of contributions up to 2-300. There are several reasons for this which I am going to explore later.

I also went to the face-to-face meetings of the forum (held on the first Thursday of every month in Budapest restaurants) and to a summer garden party organised by one of the participants. If it was possible, I also spent time with the participants in their homes. By doing so, I followed the research strategy that advises to also consider "off-line social contexts that participants jointly create" (Kendall 1999) (p.62). Long-term involvement amongst the participants of the forum, through a variety of methods, serves the proper contextualisation of aspects of their lives in others (Miller and Slater 2000) (p.21). The internet is not a space

detached from any connections to 'real life' and face-to-face interaction. Interpreting the findings and putting them in the context of e-participation or deliberative democracy could not be done without becoming one of the participants online as well as spending time with them off-line, especially because the off-line component of online participation, as I was to discover, is prominent. On the whole, the ethnographic approach gave me a researcher's stand I was comfortable with: I was developing my ideas and interpretations in dialogue and together with the participants.

Interviewing participants

Since I started the research with few pre-formulated ideas and wanted to find out how participants at the forum create the meanings and interpretations of their activity, my interviews were semi-structured. I put together an interview protocol organised into thematic areas, covering issues I wanted to learn more about at the outset of the research. The questions on the protocol concerned

1. general inquiries about how participants use the Internet (how they first encountered it, how much they use it and from where, what they do online);
2. how participants became involved in political/public affairs discussion online and on Index);
3. what in their view constitutes a good debate (including specific examples of particularly good or bad debates and fellow participants);
4. participants' perception of the position of the forum in the larger deliberative democratic system (including questions about their awareness of who reads the forum and their interpretation of the performance of public figures present in the discussions);
5. participants's views on how moderation works;

6. the array of political views present on the forum and the political identity of interviewees, as well as a standard list of questions probing into the issue of political efficacy;
7. alternative venues of political discussion available to participants (including questions on how these discussions are different from the online forum);
8. impressions and views of participants about the face-to-face meetings among members of the forum (including questions on how the discussion on politics at these events differs from the forum and whether they perceive any impacts it may have on subsequent discussion online);
9. whether participants consider Polforum a peculiarly Hungarian phenomenon; and
10. how they perceive its future.

The questions I asked inevitably reflected my agenda (the relationship between the discussion forum and deliberative democracy), which could be very different from what participants think important. Therefore I was ready to digress from the set questions, looking for cues as to what their perception and interpretation of the forum was. Digression in this case was essential, and as a result, I regularly ended up in discussions about, to give but a few examples, civil society, antisemitism, the internal workings of political party headquarters, certain ministries or local governments, internet technology, history, and so on.

I interviewed altogether 37 participants, and had informal conversations of different length and depth with another 10-12 people at the face-to-face meetings. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, in settings ranging from the homes of participants to public places like cafés, bars and restaurants. Although some authors claim that meeting in public places is not ideal for conducting non-standardized interviews (Mann and Stewart 2000), I found these settings satisfactory. A lot of in-depth information was gained from interviewees, and the interviews tended to run well beyond the 90 minutes allowed for by the

tapes I was using. I taped all interviews I conducted face-to-face, with the informed consent of interviewees. In two cases interviewees preferred to talk over the phone, but those conversations too were recorded. The rest of the interviews were carried out through e-mail.

One of the discoveries I made in the course of the research was that the technology mediating the interaction between researcher and interviewee matters indeed. In the majority of the cases where I relied on e-mail in interviewing participants, the resulting texts were less rich in detail, less in-depth than in the cases where I had the opportunity to ask my questions and probe the responses of participants face-to-face. This of course may be my bias for traditional, face-to-face communication. But the fact remains that apparently participants found answering questions through e-mail cumbersome, and with the exception of a few individuals they tended to say less than they would perhaps do had we been sitting across a table. Incidentally, the interviewees who made the most of the e-mail option of answering questions tended to be geographically distant, i.e. living outside Budapest or even Hungary. It seems that for them, electronic means of communication come naturally when they are trying to communicate with the largely Budapest-based population of the forum, and talking to me via e-mail fit this practice.

Some of my interviewees continue to call or e-mail me with new developments, which is very satisfying personally, and draws attention to the importance of personal relationships that underlie much of the discussion on the forum. The web of personal relationships is formed over time, and essentially manages to overcome the anonymity the use of online handles, referred to as “nicks”, creates. Sometimes I ring or e-mail an old interviewee about something I read on the forum, and they take these intrusions as natural, which shows how comfortable they are with the intertwining and overlapping of their worlds on- and offline.

Sampling

Sampling on Politika forum is like “fishing in a very big pond” (Mann and Stewart 2000) (p.80), full of people with experience of the forum. This was convenient, for if someone failed to respond to my request for an interview or dropped out after an initial response, I could try somebody else. Unfortunately, the company that owns the forum (as part of the internet portal Index) is unable to give statistics as to how many registered users Politika forum has. One of the reasons for this is that there are no restrictions on the number of ‘nicks’ an individual may have on the forum⁴⁸. But even worse from the researcher’s point of view, the software used on the forum section of the portal allows only aggregate data, i.e. it registers nicks for all of Index’s forums, not just Politika. That number is around 300,000, but it is impossible to say how many active people on Politika are included in it. I did not establish at the outset of the research the number of interviews I want or need to make. I followed a trail of ‘saturation’, carrying on with the interviews until I felt nothing new could be learned about the issues I was interested in.

In contacting participants, I sought to sample the widest range of characteristics relevant to the forum. In this case, this meant finding people with different political convictions. This was a fortunate case of a coincidence between member-identified and observer-identified categories: participants themselves tend to view the forum in terms of a left-right distinction, with several shades within each broad category. Of the 37 interviews I made, 19 were with self-confessed liberals or left-wingers, and 18 were with self-confessed right-wingers. The numbers are roughly equal, although not by design in the sense that my intention was not to keep a balance between the two groups. Initially, I decided to contact a set of participants based on their prominence. I had been ‘lurking’ on the forum for months before I began interviewing participants, so I was beginning to have an idea of who some of the most active or oldest participants were. After interviewing the initial set of participants, I

⁴⁸ This is also why it would not have been possible to compile a representative sample of participants, even if I had wished to do survey research on the forum. The population itself is unknown, if population is understood as the people who participate.

also started to rely on ‘snowballing’, finding interviewees through or on the recommendation of participants I interviewed. I also kept finding people on the forum who attracted my interest for making interesting, unusual, insightful, etc. contributions. The category of ‘interesting’ of course reflects my own subjective judgement (although strictly not my own political preferences). However, snowballing helped reduce this built-in source of potential bias.

Making contact

Finding people who are experienced in the discussion on Politika forum seems an easy task, as at the time of the research the software of the forum allowed instant access to the e-mail addresses of participants. I sent out the following e-mail to 72 potential interviewees:

Dear XY,

I am Ildiko Kaposi, doing my PhD at the political science department of CEU. I am researching what the Polforum of Index means from the perspective of democracy.

As part of my research, I would like to talk to you about Index. The conversation could happen electronically or face-to-face, depending on what suits you better.

All forum dwellers who participate in the research will appear anonymously or under pseudonyms, and the same holds for nicks too.

Unfortunately I do not yet have my own homepage, but you can find some of my earlier work on the website of the Mediakutato journal (I am one of the editors).

Please let me know if we can talk at some time, you name the date, medium, and location.

Thank you,

Ildiko

Around half of the people I e-mailed responded. As is normal with research carried out online, I have no way of knowing whether the individual who did not e-mail back never

received my message, deleted it as junk or spam, or was unwilling to participate in the research.

I had the most difficulties accessing the extreme rightwing on the forum. What this implies for the research is a potential danger of bias against extreme right-wing participants, whose views may not be represented in the research. However, the textual analysis of discussion topics can make up for this absence, as the contributions of extreme right-wingers are included in the analysis.

Political preferences

As a researcher engaged in an ethnography of a political discussion forum, the issue of my own political preferences was bound to emerge. Without knowing anything about me, participants were making presuppositions based on my affiliation with a university, or a family member I have, but even my smoking habits or my ability to converse on Hungarian literature gave them important contextual cues to my own background. In an environment driven by political divisions, my choice to reveal as little as possible about which parties I support amounted to an anomaly, and it explains why the number of my contributions stayed low.

I did take sides on some issues I discussed online, otherwise there would have been little point in entering the debate. The only label I earned myself was that of a 'First Amendment absolutist', which – due to the state of flux classical political and ideological categories are in – did not help identify me along partisan lines. Since it was not political preferences I was researching, but the ways people use and engage with the Internet for political participation, it was possible to avoid pressures to reveal my preferences without deceit. But the attempts to stay as neutral as possible succeeded primarily because of the contextual cues participants had about me, and because of my status as an „interested

sojourner” (Geertz 1973) (p.20), an “acceptable marginal member” (Mann and Stewart 2000) (p. 89).

Sketchy socio-demographic data

I did not attempt to gather socio-demographic data about interviewees, mainly because I was concerned that they may feel this intrusive. Nevertheless, it became clear from the interviews and the face-to-face meetings that women are a minority among forum participants: 7 of my 37 interviewees were female, and at the face-to-face events I had conversations with another 5. Despite not probing socio-demographics, in many cases both male and female participants initiated revelations about their occupation, family background, or marital status, and I was able to estimate their age once we met. The – very sketchy – profile of the group that can be pieced together from the face-to-face encounters and, to a lesser extent, the online discussions shows forum participants to be older than the general demographics of Index readers. While in 2002 41% of readers on Index were aged 18 – 29, and 40% were 30 – 49 (Drótos, Kováts, and Gast 2004), only 5 of my interviewees were in their 20s, the others came from the 30 – 60 age group. Nearly all of them were college graduates or students, they had white-collar jobs or ran their own small to medium business. Geographically, forum dwellers come mostly from Budapest. The few exceptions either make the trip to the capital when a face-to-event is organised, or are forced to miss out on these. The forum also has participants from abroad, although not many; among my interviewees there were 5 people who live abroad, all of them in the United States.

Issues of translation

The online political discussions, as well as talk at the face-to-face meetings or the interviews occur in Hungarian, and I translated all quotes from these into English. Some meaning is inevitably changed or lost in this process, although I tried to preserve the authenticity of the conversations reported here by staying as true to the original as was

possible. Wherever I could, I reproduced the typing errors, the incorrect grammatical turns, the stylistic choices regarding capitalisation and punctuation, as well as the colloquial and slang terms participants use. Furthermore, I relied on a conscious misspelling in the recurring term of “topic”. That word is used in both writing and speaking in its original English form, but it does not stand out in an English-language environment. In order to reproduce its linguistic alienness, I spell it consistently as “topik”. Finally, I use two different font types to differentiate between quotes taken from postings on the forum and the interviews. With texts translated from postings, I use Verdana which my word processor identified as the font type used on the forum. For interview transcripts and reports of personal conversations, I use standard Times New Roman letters.

One thing that is irretrievably lost as a combination of translation and the confidentiality I promised participants is the richness of the nicks or handles that appear on the forum. I did discuss with participants these important elements in self-representation, and in several cases it became clear that care and effort went into choosing them. To indicate the importance attached by participants to their handles, I found replacements for them instead of a meaningless code. In some cases, I replace nicks with speaking names that reveal something about the person behind; in others I try to choose a term that expresses something of the atmosphere a well-established nick evokes. However, originals cannot be part of my analysis, and they do not appear in this text.

Ethical considerations

Ethics is an extremely important area, and one that is fairly neglected in the Hungarian literature on online discussion forums. It is seductive to treat online discussion forums as vast fields where natural interaction between people can be observed unnoticed. Though there is no consensus on how this opportunity is to be used, I favoured disclosure of my intentions over covertly gathering data about participants. The rules of the forum imply that all online

contributions are public acts of communication and are to be treated as such, so theoretically, researchers may feel authorised to freely sample the text that appears online. However, the ambiguous status of online communication in terms of a private-public distinction makes straightforward quoting from the forum, without the informed consent of participants or without anonymising the contributors, problematic.

I made my identity very clear to everyone on the forum and at the face-to-face meetings. No participant refused to engage in conversation with me after finding out who I was, so disclosure in my experience has not hindered the research. On the other hand, the same disclosure prevented me from attending other face-to-face meetings of different groups of participants.

I promised full anonymity to everyone on the forum. This holds for IRL names as well as nicks. Many participants think this is unnecessary, but it is an important ethical issue that no utterance quoted in the research should be traceable back to the person who spoke with me. Indeed, some participants consented to an interview on the condition that they would be granted full anonymity. Others never revealed their 'real' identity. I exchanged several e-mails with someone whose IRL identity I am uncertain about. Yet, within the context of the forum, it is still possible to treat information and data collected this way authentic, because this nick is accepted as an authentic contributor. What is of interest here for the research is the way authenticity is produced and constructed on the forum. On this note, I encountered another intriguing ethical dilemma. Some of the participants have the necessary technological expertise and the computers to track down contributors – and they do so. They readily offered me information as to the identity of some of the participants, but unfortunately that is not information an ethically conscious researcher may use. And yet I am aware of the fact that such data too inform my research, even if I do not make them explicit.

CHAPTER V: POLITIKA FORUM

The political context in which I started my research was the aftermath of the 2002 parliamentary elections. Campaign 2002 by all accounts was an extraordinary time for politicised interaction in Hungarian society. Emotionally charged, embroiled in symbolic issues, crystallising around the personalities of political leaders, and unabashed in its reliance on black propaganda, the campaigns waged by both of the two main political camps were geared towards mobilising their supporters (Fowler 2003; Fowler 2002; Kapitány and Kapitány 2002; Sükösd and Vásárhelyi 2002). Rampant political debates were said to be tearing the fabric of everyday social cooperation apart, with heated discussions about the merits of one or the other political party overtaking not only the media but also the workplace, family life, and companies of friends. The electoral victory of the socialist-liberal alliance took everyone by surprise, the more so because opinion polls were consistently predicting the reelection of the right-wing government. Talk about election fraud ensued, but none of these claims were found to be substantiated, and the new government took office.

It was to be expected that the discussions on Politika forum, already noted for their harshness, would follow suit in the crescendo. And so they did, becoming more heated and polarised as the campaign unfolded. During the campaign I was still ‘lurking’ on the forum, following the increasingly harsh exchanges without contributing to them. It was in the aftermath of the campaign, in summer 2002 that I started contacting participants for interviews, to markedly different responses from the left and the right.

1. The great division: participants Left and Right

Being on the political left or right on Politika forum is the norm. ‘Lefties’ and ‘righties’ form the two large camps, with liberals routinely being identified as belonging to

the leftie bloc. Affiliation with either camp is produced in the course of the discussions, where the positions people take on the issues raised signal their political identifications. Despite its apparent straightforwardness, political identification can be a complex matter. Discussion veterans are easy to identify as belonging to one camp or another, with long records of opinions and views built up over the years clarifying political affiliations. But with newcomers, heuristic devices become crucial in suggesting to others what to make of a new participant. At the outset of my research, making my affiliation with Central European University (CEU) known instantly classified me as someone on the opposite side for some of the right-wing participants. The right-wingers' reactions ranged from ignoring my request or responding only to refuse point blank to talk to me to granting me an interview cautiously, or agreeing to talk with an open and friendly disposition.

A well-known columnist of the right-wing press, whom I knew to be a participant on the forum under a pseudonym, responded to my request in an e-mail that said:

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> >>> Xxxx Xxxx <xxx@axelero.hu> 11/28/02 01:26PM >>>
> Dear Ms [Ildikó]!
> If life were civilised here, I would say with pleasure. But to You I will respond with what [a
liberal party leader] told [a right-wing daily]:
> "I am not giving an interview to this
> newspaper". Therefore: I have no business with CEU.
> Yours,
> x.x.
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When pressed a little, the same person switched to English and shortcircuited the argument by declaring

>>> Xxxx Xxxx <xxx@axelero.hu> 11/28/02 16:16 PM >>>

No. The other side wages a life-and-death struggle against my side. You are on the other side.

The finality was underlined by the lack of polite forms like greeting and signature in the second e-mail, indicating a complete shutdown of communication.

A prominent right-wing participant sought advice from other right-wingers about how to respond to my initial request, whether to agree to the interview at all. A row broke out among the people he consulted, with some of them telling him to go ahead, add the rightie perspective to the research, others telling him to go ahead but not to show his face to the researcher, and still others saying a categorical ‘no’. In the aftermath of the lost elections, some of the right-wingers were gripped by an (in their own words) “paranoia”, vague fears that the socialist-liberal political camp may want to gather information about their identities and activities to use the data against them. From this perspective, it even appeared possible that an e-mail sent to them from a CEU account was a “provocation”.

Provocations are an unwelcome but existing practice in online discussions. In the US, postings that are intended to trigger a flame war (Dery 1994), that is vitriolic online exchanges that are irrelevant and disruptive, are referred to as “flame baits” or “trolling”. In the context of Hungarian internet discussions, provocations entail testing the reactions of discussion communities by provocative statements, often from the guise of a newly created online handle. The concept of provocation also has the historically validated political connotation of the *agent provocateur*, a person assigned to disrupt the activities of a group by provoking unrest, debate, or argument from within. In my case, the shadow of suspicion about provocation was eventually lifted when I reverted to another crucial heuristic device:

mobilising patronage. My first key informant, St_Keith is one of the moderate rightie participants, and he assured right-wingers that my e-mail was not a provocation. He vouched for my trustworthiness in keeping the promises of confidentiality and anonymity, and his intervention helped with some right-wingers, although probably more so with those who were already inclined to talk to me.

In the end, the participant who felt the need to consult his fellow righties opted for a face-to-face interview, saying that he preferred “an open game”. That expression sounded defiant, as if he felt he was responding to a challenge from someone he perceived to be from the broad left-liberal camp by saying ‘I’m not afraid to stand up to my views, I have no need to hide behind the anonymity (facelessness) of an electronic interview’. And so on the 4th of July, 2002, I was sitting in a Budapest pub across the table from DeLex, one of the old-timers with well over 10 thousand postings contributed to Politika forum. The meeting with DeLex and the subsequent events of that day made the divisions ruling Polforum tangible, therefore a more detailed account of them can illustrate a number of points about the political context in which forum discussions were proceeding at the time.

A soft-spoken man in his 50s, DeLex had grey hair and a greying beard, and he wore a short-sleeved shirt in the summer. He mentioned that he worked in a bank, but he had also been a founding member and still held a post in MDF (the small conservative party in Hungarian parliament). DeLex was clearly anxious to compartmentalise his life in terms of political activities. The unpaid work he was doing for the party and his participation on the forum were the spheres of explicit political engagement. The workplace for him was strictly off limits for political discussions, even when others around him were talking about the developments of the campaign, because “this is a rather sensitive subject for everyone. There are those who can be convinced, there are those who cannot, and this really does not belong to the workplace. I am not going to fall out with somebody because he holds different views

from mine about something. This is not the ground for that. I would enter the argument somewhere else, but not at work”. His family came somewhere in between, with politics discussed from time to time, but never on his initiative and not as an issue that would be allowed to take a central role.

As if trying to decide into which compartment the interview could be fitted, DeLex adopted a stance of caution throughout the conversation. His responses were guarded, especially when asked about other forum participants. In one case, he refused to say the ‘real’ name of a participant, even though it is fairly widely known, and when I remembered it he merely nodded in agreement. Gradually, however, he relaxed his guardedness. Towards the end of the conversation, especially after the tape recorder was switched off, he became so much more relaxed that he was describing the family history of the participant whose name he had refused to utter before, gave details on others he preferred not to explain about earlier on, and even offered to call another rightie old-timer to get his email address for me.

DeLex used to have a close relationship with a number of left-liberal forum participants, meeting them face to face regularly in an earlier period when “there wasn’t such a big distance between the left and the right as there is now”. One of his stories from this early period when the forum dwellers of all political ilk were still friendly and close described a very intimate personal experience he had shared with the prominent left-winger Shekhina. Intimacy in this case involved religion: he asked her to take him to a synagogue because he was deeply interested in finding out more about Jewish culture, and she as the former wife of a Hungarian rabbi was able to make the introductions. When he entered the synagogue, he was given a *kippa* (he said the word with a movement of his hands imitating a skullcap on his head) and a Hebrew-only prayer book. Men and women were seated separately, but Shekhina kept sneaking outside the women’s section to instruct him in loud whispers: page 32, then 41, etc, so he could follow the ceremony. DeLex smiled fondly at these memories,

yet Shekhina is one of the people whom he would no longer call, would no longer get together with for a lengthy conversation over drinks or dinner. The coarsening of the discussion forum has gradually put an end to that, and now all social relationships are very heavily politicised. This is why a CEU affiliation too is a problem, said DeLex. He started asking questions about CEU, wanting to find out more in a cautious and circumspect way about what the faculty was like. Then he added that another person who comes to mind about CEU immediately is George Soros, together with a number of people who are ‘on CEU payroll’, including a well-known radical Hungarian philosopher whose name he had seen on a list of recipients of CEU funding.

It is possible that DeLex was beginning to like me as the interview progressed, and that thawed his reserve. Equally or more likely, the need to show how well-informed he was (about my university as well as other forum participants) started to override his guardedness. Being well-informed, or at least appearing so, is crucial to achieving prestige on Politika forum. Flashing bits of knowledge about either the forum’s participants or any other politically relevant issue or organisation is what marks out insiders, as I was going to discover in the following months. But on July 4th I was still an absolute outsider, wrapping up one of my first interviews and stepping outside from the pub to the street awash with political participation of a different kind. People were gathering for a follow-up event to the demonstration started that morning by the blocking of one of Budapest’s bridges, demanding a recount of the votes of the April 2002 national elections. DeLex and I wandered around in the crowd; he seemed ambivalent about the outcome of the demonstration (“I’m not sure where this would lead”, he said). Then, after warning me not to stay around for “things could get nasty”, he left. I lingered on, chatted briefly with one of the exhausted, young policewomen who said they had been standing there “for a very long time” and expected to stand around for a while longer. I left as the police started to squeeze the crowd from the

square, on the whole still peacefully, despite the half a dozen or so demonstrators whose arms were locked behind their backs as they were taken away in police wagons.

That evening, the left-liberal forum participants were holding their regular monthly meeting, known as PFT, on a restaurant boat moored on the Danube. PFT is the acronym of Politika Fórumosok Találkozója, or Politika Forum Meeting, and its time and place are publicly available, always announced on the forum. As an outsider though I sought permission from Shekhina in the morning to make sure my showing up at the meeting was acceptable. There were about eight people sitting at a table on board the boat, and when they saw me glancing at them hesitantly, they asked me: PFT or Formula 1? It turned out that the Formula 1 topik on Index just reached a size large enough to justify a face-to-face meeting that evening, at the same restaurant. The group inquired after my forum nick, but as soon as stated my name, Shekhina, who was sitting towards the middle of the table, jumped in. She loudly introduced me, told them I was a researcher doing my thesis about Politika forum, and her approval of my presence closed off any debate over whether I should be allowed to sit there with them. Once again, patronage gained me access to participants.

I ended up at one end of the table next to Zemlya and 3minor, two men in their late 40s, one thin and lanky, the other round-faced and corpulent. Both of them were friendly and subjected me to the rite of passage for newcomers in the form of a shower of stories about the forum. Among the first things 3minor told me was that this was the left-liberal group's meeting. Prodded by further questions, he said they used to get together with people from the right too, but that does not happen anymore, because the right-wingers are "foaming crazy" these days (DeLex too was mentioned as an example of a former 'cool' right-winger who had since 'lost it'). Throughout the conversation, the forum's right-wingers were repeatedly referred to in contexts of low intellectual capacity. As 3minor kept explaining, the supporters of right-wing politics tend to be like sheep, mindlessly following their leader

around. He also kept referring to the “Hungarian Sheep Party” topik he had opened on the forum to poke fun at political Sklavenmoral. In the end, 3minor gave me his card, but Zemlya couldn’t find a card first so he used the back of his colleague’s card to jot down his e-mail address. When Zemlya took the card, he read the name on it and said, “funny, we’ve been sitting at tables and talking for years, but this is the first time I learned his name was Tamás”.

That evening I drank with them, had dinner with them, and talked to them as if I really belonged. I did not of course, but after about an hour, the people at the table stopped trying to educate me in how the forum works, who the participants are, and what they do, which moved me away from an outsider status towards that of a less-known member of the group.

Gammabetic was among those around the table who wanted to know what my nick was, and when I told him that I was not contributing, he said disapprovingly, “that’s a wrong approach”. He was right. The forum experience cannot be acquired unless one contributes online and becomes a solid member. During that first face-to-face meeting, I was happy to reveal details about myself and my research when quizzed about them, but I tended to be silent about my political preferences that did not always coincide with those of others around the table. With this bracketing of disagreement, it was easy to join in the conversation as it was highly sociable and friendly, as it can be in a politically by and large homogeneous group whose members had known each other and had been getting together for face-to-face meetings for years.

The talk was a mixture of political commentary, anecdotes of previous meetings, and stories about the online discussions. Political subjects blended into the general bonhomie of talk: in one instance, the relative handsomeness of Bill Clinton, George Bush, and Al Gore were discussed, with opinion converging on Gore as the most attractive of the lot. Yet controversy was never far away. This is a very opinionated bunch of people, which makes

research easy and quite difficult at the same time. Easy because they talk freely (at least up to a certain point), but difficult because giving any opinion may trigger strong reactions. At some point, the conversation turned to a recent case of gay men getting beaten up in Italy. One of the people asked, “what kind of a country is that where gays can be beaten up in the streets and they get away with it?” I remembered the stories I had heard about gay-bashing in Texas, so I said, “the United States”? They jumped on this remark with the well-oiled reflexes of forum discussion veterans. It turned out that this utterance in an online debate would have been an instant indication that I was on the other side from them, because allegedly it is one of the standard techniques of right-wingers to point the finger at others, questioning the moral integrity of arguments condemning the right for something that is also an existing practice in other places. On hearing the explanation about the stories from Texas, the group pardoned my lapse into what for them signalled rightie argumentation.

That July day seemed to offer a symbolic pattern of the divisions that ruled Politika forum. The conversations with the right-wing participant and the left-liberal group occurred in spatial segregation, with the demonstrators protesting the election results swarming in the chasm between the two sides. The increased polarisation, the split into “us” and “them”, permeated participants’ ways of thinking about one another. When talking about other forum dwellers, they tended to name people or nicks whose politics they identified with without any discriminating adjectives. But they always referred to nicks of ‘the other side’ by stating that the person was right-wing (or left), specifying sometimes the political party to whose views the person was close. This – probably unconscious – differentiation highlighted the cleavages on the forum, the drive to rely on political camps as markers in the discussions. As Cellular, who is known as a moderate right-winger, explained later: “I sense in many people a palpable compulsion to belong to a group. They try to become part of one side and attack the other. There are a few dozen people on Politika forum who are visibly driven by gang rules,

defending a member of my own gang even if he writes something stupid, and attacking a member of the opposite gang even if he says something smart. It is very rare to find someone who does not fit this pattern, and then he is viewed as a funny squirrel everywhere.”

The ideas, opinions, and views expressed in the discussions are the primary means of declaring group allegiance. Right-wingers are critical observers of left-liberal organisations and institutions (including parties, governments, media, affiliated institutions), raising issues about any objectionable step public figures may take; while left-liberal participants do the same for the right-wing political field. Subject matters are complemented by terminology as indicators of political affiliation. The emphasis on the reform communist roots of the Socialist Party is a rightie giveaway, expressed in referring to the party as ‘communists’, ‘commies’, or with the pun ‘comanche’; adding ‘comrade’ to the names of its politicians; or making references to social and political practices under the old regime. These tools serve to highlight the continuity between the communist era and the Socialist bloc of the democratised regime, but their rhetorical effectiveness is due to their evocative power of a bygone political culture whose rigid forms lend themselves easily to parody and ridicule. Similarly, the unctuous mannerisms of some right-wing speech offer themselves for parody to the left-liberals, and the authoritarian management style of the leader of the biggest right-wing political party supplies endless references for left-liberals who want to make their critical stand known. Many politicians have sobriquets, the use of which also signals the user’s opinion.

Apart from rhetorics, there is a host of social norms participants need to observe if they are to keep up their membership in a bloc. Making friends with the ‘enemy’ camp, such as a rightie going to a PFT meeting, can be interpreted as ‘betrayal’ by the more radical participants. Major upheavals in the life of the forum are preserved in collective memory and continue to supply fuel to maintaining the divisions, much the way in fact that historical memories of uprisings continue to help forge national identities. For example, references to

the great secession in 2001, when the firing of a right-wing moderator triggered an exodus of right-wingers from the forum, permeated talk in interviews in 2002.

Bridges over the divide

The left-right divisions are nonetheless not all-encompassing. Some issues cut across regular political lines and can unite old opponents, rearranging the divisions for a topik. This was the case with gun control, where leftie and rightie opponents were jointly defending gun rights; homosexuality, where visceral rejection in some cases manages to overrule liberal political convictions; and antisemitism, which is rejected by moderate righties and can be adopted by some left-leaning participants. Personal relationships and friendships are sometimes able to transcend the division. In one notable case, romance blossomed between political opponents when Shekhina, the dame of the leftie bloc, and Postal Minder, who until then was known as one of the radical righties, fell in love. As Shekhina recalls, the two of them met a few times at the PFTs, they argued, had “red-faced shouting matches” in public, started e-mailing, and ended up as an item. Romantic relationships and love stories were not new for forum participants, but this was the first (and so far the only) time that the heart triumphed over political cleavages. This was inconceivable, shocking, and a truly juicy piece gossip. The news spread around the forum within two and a half hours, flabbergasting most participants. Shekhina says, “I was labelled everything, from liberalbrownshirt down to anything you can imagine. Him too: traitor, disloyal to right-wing ideas, leftie provocateur. When we showed up for a meeting holding hands, dear Geyseer just stared at us gazing at each other for two hours, and in the end asked, are you serious?” They were serious, and a year and a half later they were still going strong. Postal Minder’s online messages continued to be right-wing, but his choice of a partner had cost him his membership in the rightie camp. He was excommunicated from his group by the radical participants; he became, in his own words, a “pariah”.


The left–right division is fundamental to the discussions on Politika forum. All participants realise that disagreement is what fuels debate, but if it turns too harsh, it can stifle conversation. Time and again there are calls on the forum for peace, an end to the acrimony. Just before the elections in 2002, a call was issued for all participants to share a drink from the ‘cup of peace’ and bury the hatchet. Those who seconded the suggestion gathered after the elections in a green valley in Budapest, dug a hole, and buried a hatchet quite literally. The event was documented and archived on the portal, as well as getting covered by the Index newsroom⁴⁹, but it failed to achieve a return to calmness in the discussions, as the right-wingers – with the exception of Noisy who later said he had been “hoodwinked” – stayed away from it. The offer to make peace was interpreted by the righties to have been insincere, a mere extension of the jubilation the left-liberal camp felt over their election victory. As St_Keith explained, the recurring calls for peace and an end to the verbal violence failed to work partly because they missed the essence of participation on the forum. It was usually relative newcomers or naive (“dumb”, St_Keith said) participants who initiated the peace calls, but the old-timers knew better, they knew the forum was “about something else”.

Still, the essence of Polforum was the call that helped a rare unification of participants in 2002, when the new Socialist-Liberal government coalition announced that they were appointing Tibor Dévényi as advisor to the minister of children’s, youth, and sports affairs. Dévényi is a relic from communist-era television, best known for a 1980s children’s show that was broadcast on the state television channel. After his appointment, he was interviewed and asked by the reporter how he felt about the negative reception the news of his appointment had on the two leading online news portals. Unwisely, the man announced, “I never read the online media, because I think net users are socially disabled weasels who do not dare stand up

⁴⁹ <http://index.hu/politika/belfold/beke0426> - last accessed July 20, 2006.

for their opinion, they prefer spreading abuse facelessly. Why should I care that Joe and Jane discuss that Dévényi is a d---head? Why should I care?”

The gaffe provoked the predictable reactions of indignation and outrage on the forum. Instead of, or rather alongside, simple flaming, participants also made extensive use of mockery and ridicule in discussing Dévényi. He was compared to another public official, László Grespik, who had become known as a notorious supporter of the radical right-wing party MIÉP and who refused in 2002 to appear as a guest interviewee on Index, claiming that he did not like faceless questioners, he did not wish to have a conversation with “internet rats” the likes of whom were “free to come patch my ass”.⁵⁰ Participants promptly labelled Dévényi the Socialist Grespik, and they shared stories of the man’s dreadful old television show, provided links to his terrible recordings and performances, and, better than a thousand words, added his picture to the topik:

xxxxxx	válasz megnéz	2004.04.22 19:24:40 (484)
		
+ halok! ⁵¹		
Előzmény: xxxxxxx (482)		

⁵⁰ <http://index.hu/valasztas/grespik0123/> - last accessed July 20, 2006.

⁵¹ “I’ll ♠ dead!”

The gaffe cost Dévényi his advisor post, but the forum kept an eye on him from then on, and the original topik dedicated to him was reactivated several times in 2004 and 2005, with predictably hostile commentary on all the career moves the man made. Participants on left and right agreed as one that it was a big political mistake to appoint the man. Supporters of all political parties and ideologies converged on the complete rejection of Dévényi's charges, creating a consensus that was so unusual it was commented on by several participants in the topik. This episode, together with the similar outrage caused by the right-wing Grespik, indicates the existence of a shared identity among participants whose experiences as forum dwellers can help forge a consensual stand if their community becomes under attack from the 'outside'.

2. Standards and practices of discussion

Forum participants are self-confessed avid consumers of news media and use the forum to share information and opinions on the latest developments. All major political events have topik opened about them, sometimes more than one topik that then become merged by the moderators. Reactions to news events are swift, and the number of participants make it possible for them to cover the events among one another; someone is bound to spot a news item others may be interested in. Attila, a participant who has a reputation as a radical right-winger, described the attraction Polforum holds for him precisely along these lines: "If anything happens anywhere in the world, we can discuss the events within an hour on the forum of Index". The forum can even become the primary source of news for some participants. In July 2002 I was staying at the summer house of MrsNorris who invited me to spend the night so we could have plenty of time to talk about the forum. MrsNorris is a plump woman with feline eyes and a voice with a lilt like miaows. She is a well-established

translator of archeological and historical texts, therefore she is already computer-bound by her work, and Polforum fits well into her work routines. While I was there, I received an SMS from a friend telling me about the resignation of the man who was the head of the right-of-centre Fidesz party. The story of the resignation broke just as I was having breakfast with my hostess, so I could share the news with her immediately. Her reaction was peculiar: Nah, it's not true, she said, she'd just seen Polforum and there were no topikis about this. Later on, when she went online and checked the forum again, she saw topikis about the Fidesz leader's resignation and said, So, it's true after all. She did not bother with trying to see if the story was published in the news section of the Index portal, or on any other news site, she headed straight to the list of topikis of discussion to find out about the news agenda.

The active dissemination and interpretation of the news on the forum is complemented by the sharing of information and knowledge on the background details of stories, or any other issue people start to discuss. Participants have diverse educational and professional backgrounds, and collectively they are able to generate a veritable fountain of knowledge. Expert commentary is available on the forum about a wide range of issues from professionals ranging "from patent attorney to nuclear physicist", as Anjun says. Other participants highlight history and economics as areas in which the expert commentary posted to the forum in the course of long-running discussions gave them a true educational experience. The forum produces knowledge collectively, through the altruistic practices of sharing expert views and explanations with others for no financial or material gain. For someone with a strong interest but no formal education in a subject, it is "priceless" to engage in discussion with others who have similar interests, for they can pool their intellectual resources, combine the knowledge gained from the different books and sources each has read, recommend further readings, or simply present the outlines and main points of original arguments that other participants may not have the time to read for themselves. Attila summed up the utility of forum education by

saying, “I can’t imagine learning more with any other method with the same amount of energy invested”, and most of the participants I had conversations with voiced similar views about the benefits of participation. The quality of postings can also merit the same treatment that is applied to traditional sources of information and knowledge; for instance Cellular, who also believes the main attraction of the forum is its being a source of learning, says he keeps an electronic scrapbook of noteworthy forum postings. He occasionally files away longer postings and material cited from somewhere else so that he could read them later and reference them in further discussions.

The discussion format of exchanges helps their educational force because no declaration of an expert opinion goes unchallenged, which provides additional incentives for participants to come to the forum well-prepared. Once they become engaged in a serious, extended discussion, they read up on the issue they are discussing, checking facts, media sources, literature, anything that can support their position. Knowledgeability about issues also earns them prestige, and it can happen, even if not too often, that they bow to the force of a better argument. Proving beyond doubt that an opponent was wrong about something is a major feat, crowned by the other’s acknowledging defeat. Polforum has “Mea Culpa”, a special topik dedicated to public announcements made by participants to admit they were wrong, and also to apologise to their opponent for vehemently denying that their position was right. Arguments may end in the participant who cornered his/her opponent calling on the other to “go to mea culpa”, which is a declaration of victory even if the actual excursions to the admissions topik do not materialise.

There are no limits to the range of issues that can justify the efforts to present well-founded claims that are supported by evidence. On one occasion, Postal Minder was sitting across a table from me in the middle of the day in a small coffee-shop, having a conversation about the forum. Postal is a computer expert, but during our conversation his partner

Shekhina rang him to ask for information about the methods of roasting an ox. She was logged on to the forum from work, and she got into an argument with an old extreme rightie opponent about ox-roasting. She was anxious to win the argument, and for that she needed information. Postal rang his father, a retired master chef, for instructions, then forwarded what he had learned: oxen are not marinated, for there is no tub large enough for marinating a whole animal. After presenting the winning argument to her, Postal also recommended that Shekhina should insert in the posting a reference about her winning the “lying contest” on the claim that she had seen a tub for marinating oxen before. The trivial subject matter of the argument involved in this exchange only highlights the seriousness of the information-seeking that can precede a posting. On the other hand, the suggestion that discussions can be described as lie-fests is a highly sarcastic comment on the standards some participants apply to Polforum.

The quality of talk

Participants on Polforum have a strong sense of what produces quality discussions, and an equally strong sense of the demise of good discussion on the forum. As they said in the interviews:

“It is nothing like what it used to be. It used to be possible to hold sensible discussions, talk normally about certain issues – you can’t do that now. Debates used to have reasoned arguments, counter-reasoning, references, this is all gone now.”

“What makes a debate good? Arguments, real reasoning that come from informed positions. I mean if one is willing to fact-check.”

“Cultured debate is free from the ad hominem and prejudice, we don’t respond to each other with personal attacks in the absence of arguments.”

“Classical debate does not work. [There is no] reasoning, counterargument, conclusion, crap like that.”

“Index used to be very good for me and I think for many other people too. On the one hand, in proper discussions you thought through your own arguments, what you wanted to say, whether your arguments stood up logically, coherently. One did a lot of checking, read up on things.”

The demise of quality in the discussions is usually attributed to a combination of the growth of the forum and the coarsening of the tone of Hungarian political life after 2000. The growth of the forum meant increase in the number of participants as well as an increase in the number of registered nicks, the topik opened, and the number of messages posted. In the beginning, most participants knew each other well, often from meeting in person. Growth, however, prevented the prevalence of similar personal ties, and the size of the active discussion population after a while undermined the working of the original civilising force of exclusiveness. The same complaints about how the atmosphere was better, the tone more moderate before the influx of new participants undermined civility and usefulness were also found in research on the expansion of Usenet (Pfaffenberger 1996) and by an ethnography of the non-political Törzsasztal community on Index (Gelléri 2000; Gelléri 2001). Gelléri interprets the stories of demise as a “classical myth of the golden era”, that is the retrospective appreciation of a bygone period that had its share of disputes and ad hominem attacks, although the number of participants and topik was indeed lower.

The same ‘golden era’ myth may account in part for why participants describe Polforum in terms of ‘massification’ when it was still made up of 395 identified core members at the end of 2005. But these and possibly other users had thousands of registered nicks, active and unused, and by 2002 they had produced 724,000 postings. Polforum was becoming chaotic in the sense of having so many topik opened, so many discussions started, that it was increasingly difficult to navigate its flow. In the abundance of discussion topik, it is also becoming more and more difficult to attract attention to one’s postings, and the surest

way to get responses is to declare an extreme position in harsh tones. In other words, the culture of Polforum discussions does not simply favour strongly polarised views that are expressed in harsh tones, it makes such expression a rational option for generating discussion. Most participants are aware of this; they realise that what they are posting is not exactly what they think, rather a particular version of their views that is purged of subtlety. They may even make open references to this in the course of the discussion, as casual side remarks, as in the posting which engaged with an argument about state-funded academic research by saying “I too like to compose my messages in polarised terms, that’s a specialty of Index, but I feel you were a bit unjust in your judgement...”

The tone of discussion on Polforum is often described in terms of “fikázás”, a Hungarian slang word that is defined⁵² as the “forceful reviling, vituperation, degrading of an object”. *Fikázás* is declarative, it is a way of expressing negative judgements without fair facts and arguments in support of them. While it is not unique to online discussions, it is more prevalent there, and it supports norms of discussion that presuppose adversity. Adversity, or the expectation that people’s values and convictions differ and these differences will ignite conflict in the conversations, can be an engine of discussions. At the same time, another set of norms dictating expectations about quality debate is also present in the discussions, and these norms evoke a – however distant – deliberative ideal. These norms help to counterbalance the adversary culture and maintain the political community that is created when participants engage in conversation, regardless of whether they agree with each other.

Reciprocity and accountability

Frank, a participant whose political preferences are for radical right-wing parties and organisations, described in an e-mail his views on good discussion as “It can be called pleasant if there emerges a consensus. Because even though forum participants are necessarily

⁵² <http://mek.oszk.hu/adatbazis/lexikon/phplex/lexikon/d/szleng/sz73.html#n9>

confrontational personalities, everybody is obviously pleased if they can achieve agreement on something. I usually say that the essence of forums (and the institution of current democracy) is the initiation of dialogue. The purpose is not to have everyone agreeing with everyone else about everything – this is never going to be possible. We should just be aware of each other. Of each other's thoughts. The biggest misfortune is if there's no dialogue between different groups. If we act without being aware of each other. Of each other's feelings. With some good-will towards the other, it can be possible to eliminate the most severe conflicts if we are in a position to make decisions." Frank took care to practice what he was preaching. His sincerity in professing deliberative openness started a respectful dialogue between him and Mrs Norris, an outspoken core member of left-liberal group, and he was even entertaining thoughts of attending a PFT meeting.

Greeting is an important expression of community generated through communication. It is more frequent among friendly participants, but it does not occur as a matter of routine in each conversation, which makes it even more significant. When the right-winger Publius re-appeared on the forum after months of absence following the 2002 elections, he was greeted with cries of "welcome back" and "welcome back on board" by people from the left. They continued to disagree and argue with him, but they wanted to voice their pleasure in acknowledging his return to the community. In this case, the greetings and Publius's response of "thankyou" underlined the mutual respect between participants, creating an atmosphere of friendliness by clearly valuing the time they were going to spend together, even in political disagreement.

If not already present, mutual respect can be invoked in arguments. The following exchange between two participants displays such an appeal to external norms after getting into an argument over the validity of left-wing conceptions about what would make an acceptable right-wing party in Hungary:

Roaring Reverend

You have already 'introduced' yourself a few times, why don't you drop this hypocritical blah-blah...

Newlander

Look, if you on your own can decide what it is that I want to say, and you know better than I do, then stop listening to my hypocritical blah-blah. Look for confrontation, I'm sure you'll find a partner for that. I would like to debate with those who have different opinions from mine but are willing to support them with reasoned arguments and are willing to listen to my arguments. Not necessarily so that we could convince each other, but that's what makes positions clearer. The ad hominem just makes the fog denser.

Roaring Reverend

Okay, I apologise for the ad hominem remarks, but I stand by my own opinion.

In this exchange, the principle of reciprocity is appealed to successfully in the sense that it earns an apology for the participant who invokes it, even if disagreement will continue to guide the discussion. In other conversations, however, the appeal to reciprocity produces different results:

nukia

You're a typical case, Dear Jack. You demand concrete contributions, but you forget that You too should make contributions concrete.

Jack Rabbit

"You're a typical case, Dear Jack. You demand concrete contributions, but you forget that You too should make contributions concrete."

Are you an organic perl implement?:)))

nukia

By and large your message makes absolutely no sense, Dear Jack.

Try using Hungarian language, or write for the Martian Chronicles!

Zebulun_2000

May I help to interpret it?

The Jack Rabbit nick would like to say that everybody's stupid, he's the only smart one, he's got his head even in his arse. Trust me, the control of the biological unit hiding behind the Jack Rabbit nick is not particularly complicated:)

In this conversation, the appeal to reciprocity appears as the need to find mutually acceptable arguments. The appeal also reveals nukia's relative lack of familiarity with the forum, as Jack Rabbit is known for his pugnacity and history of stropiness when engaging with others' arguments. This bit of information is supplied by Zebulun_2000 who enters the discussion to help nukia by contextualising the nonsensical messages in Jack Rabbit's forum record. For a participant like Jack Rabbit, any criticism directed at his discussion style or person can trigger a string of postings intended to affirm his superiority. Therefore the appeal to reciprocity, which also included a polite rebuke, was bound to be counterproductive. It also suggested nukia's lack of experience in Polforum discussions where conversation is jointly shaped by external norms of quality discussions and the forum's own debate culture.

Participants regularly demand from each other justifications of the claims they make. Requesting the source for the data that informs statements is a widespread mechanism for this. Meticulous sourcing was what Shekhina relied on when she tried to refute stock antisemitic arguments. Her opponent kept making claims by referring to the Talmud, Shekhina demanded the precise source of the references, and because the scriptures can be quoted with numbers specifying chapter and paragraph, she was able to look up the reference and tell that it did not include what the opponent claimed. On the other hand, while demanding sources can be an evocation of the principle of accountability, it can also be an adversary move. It can be presented as a challenge to the credibility of the other, as in the posting where WAKE UP CALL asked his opponent, “Can you also provide a source, or did you just make up the whole thing?” Even when the source is provided, it is still possible to question its authenticity, which also implies that the person who relies on it is mistaken, deceived, or lying deliberately.

Politicians, journalists, and other public figures are standard subjects for the discussions on Polforum. It is a recurring phenomenon that participants are discussing the actions and statements of public figures within a framework of accountability. They are demanding justifications for political claims and moves, and they are quick to point out the inconsistencies between speech and action that characterises much of public life. The constant monitoring is facilitated by the online environment, for the Hungarian slice of the internet provides a vast resource of online newspaper archives, academic, governmental, municipal, party, and politician websites, and similar sources where texts can be accessed and copied to the forum for dissection. The mechanisms of accountability in the everyday forum environment are made less clear because the public figures under scrutiny do not as a rule engage in the discussions. Yet the left–right camps play out the process among participants by

adopting the role of critic or defender of the public figure and answering to the claims as if acting on his or her behalf.

The forum also makes it possible for participants to hold each other accountable for the consistency of their current and previous statements. The postings of participants leave long records that are accessible to all. Previous postings can be looked up by clicking on the participant's name, which brings up a "data sheet" that includes a hyperlink ('Contributions') to all the topik the nick ever posted on:

[Fórum](#) »
Data sheet
Data sheet
Nick: xxxxxxx
Email: not public
Webpage:
Introduction:
[Contributions](#) (19032)
Status:
[Topiks opened](#)
Topik owner:

Checking the earlier contributions of discussion partners can help decide what to make of ambiguous postings, and they can be quoted in the debate to point out inconsistencies in the arguments. Since it is a somewhat time-consuming task in the case of prolific contributors, this technique is most useful if one knows roughly which topik to look up.

Reasoned argumentation

Among the criteria of quality discussion (and good deliberation), rationality is perhaps the most difficult to realise. The ongoing exchange of reasoned arguments is sometimes explicitly named as the ideal for the internet, as in mantlepiece's rant against the right-wingers who engaged in a smear campaign against a Socialist politician in the 2002 elections: "[my criticisms] of course do not apply to those rightie fellows who use the net for what it was invented for, reasonable debates where people may not convince one another but both sides can find out about the

opinions of the other side, and they do not cry high treason about people they got to know, after all we live in the same country”. Reasoning together to handle disagreement is a key to maintaining discussion, but it is difficult to sustain it – the stories of the degeneration of the quality of the discussion, the strong left–right polarisation of participants, the recognition of *fikázás* as a prevailing constituent of culture on the forum, and the abundant use of ad hominem attacks attest to this.

The political is personal in the sense that political convictions can be deeply held constituents of personal identity. Having one’s politics constantly challenged may start to feel like a challenge to the person him- or herself, which creates emotional burdens for the continuation of the discussion. People can then abandon the discussion arena, or they can try to shift the discussion to a terrain that is free of emotions: rationality. Trying to reason with others is often a successful strategy of making this shift. Participants tend to respond in like tone, hurling abuse to abuse but turning respectful when addressed respectfully and providing reasons for their opinions if others start reasoning with them. They may even alternate their tone within the same topik, depending on who they are responding to.

Discussions that involve highly technical issues or expert knowledge in a specialised area tend to be the most conducive to reasoned argumentation. Positions can and do still differ in these areas, but the technical language needed to engage meaningfully with issues of monetary policy, legislative provisions, or electoral systems cushions the discussion from outbursts of raw emotion. Legal issues, science, or the economy have produced some of the most memorable, long-running discussions on the forum. Expertise usually provides an implicit filter, although its screening function can also be spelt out as in the case of one of the most prestigious topik, The Monetary Council’s Meeting. This topik has operated on an invitation-only basis since its opening in 2001. The topik opener invited seven forum participants who had built up a reputation for their economic expertise to form a mirror

institution to the Monetary Council of the Hungarian Central Bank (MNB). The online Council holds a virtual meeting two days before the MNB meetings, members make recommendations, and the president makes a decision on monetary policy, which decision can then be compared to that of the Central Bank. Although it would have been technically possible for anyone to post to the topik, forum dwellers respected the virtual Council's wish to keep the discussion closed to outsiders. A separate topik called Virtual Monetary Council – the Gallery was opened for wider deliberations on monetary policy, and it is here that all the other interested participants can discuss monetary policy with virtual Council members. The rational discussions in the monetary council topik are facilitated further by the transparency characteristic of the operation of the Central Bank. Economic data and the Bank's positions are widely available, easy to access, and possible to interpret according to the universal principles of finance and economics. By overwriting the political, these expert codes also make it possible for leftie and rightie participants to maintain mutual respect in their common topik.

In the case of issues that are less conducive to reasoned argumentation, rationality still remains a powerful tool for indicating the acceptability of arguments, even when it is referred to under different labels. It is the implicit ideal of rationality that informs some of the ad hominem remarks aimed at passing the judgement that some arguments and participants cannot be engaged with reasonably. Slurs that declare others to be mentally disturbed, insane, childish, adolescent or primitive serve this purpose, as do the verbal shortcuts of calling others animal names⁵³. These are last resorts, they indicate that a person has given up on engaging in any sort of reasoned discussion with the other. Thus Zebulun_2000 tells Jack Rabbit “You are really, really a sick puppy” in the knowledge that sensible dialogue between them is over. Jacobi in the same topik tells Jack Rabbit, “You have really become

⁵³ The same categories have been used historically to deny people political franchise, and some of them (e.g. age or insanity) continue to restrict participation at elections.

completely senile, demented”. A flame-fest is dismissed by a participant who did not take part in it with the words, “Brainwashed and counter-brainwashed. You all deserve one another...”. After a heated ad hominem exchange, Fang apologises by saying, “You see, sometimes the bull in me roars out... and that’s a big stinking animal. Then I calm down.” Kite suggests to Toni whose postings usually focus on the fear induced in him by right-wing political parties and institutions to “go see a doctor, because you would need treatment if you are afraid of everyone and everything, if you suffer from stronger-than-average anxieties and worries, believe me: a good physician could provide the solution to your problems”.

These and many similar postings hurl epithets that make meaningful discussion or deliberation impossible. At the same time, they indicate the active construction of the boundaries of admissibility to public discussion on the forum. Particular ad hominem remarks acquire their full meaning in the process of this construction, through their contextualisation in the communicative situation in which they are posted. They are not welcome for quality discussion, but they may be justified in certain cases like when they are used for tackling opinions (such as unshakeable racism or antisemitism) that themselves are considered to be beyond reason.

The standards and practices of discussion on Polforum actually show remarkable similarity to those found on Usenet. In her content analysis of Usenet discussions on political subjects, Papacharissi found participants to prefer covert forms of impoliteness, including sarcasm and shouting (Papacharissi 2004). Besides sarcasm, her research found vulgarity, name-calling, and aspersions among the favoured expressions of aggression, but at the same time Usenet participants were highly aware of democratic ideals and frequently evoked

principles like freedom of speech or diversity in discussion. Arguments were also regularly supplemented by demands of proof for claims discussants made, and the proof had to come from reputable sources to be accepted. Considering that only a fraction of Polforum participants gives any indication that they may be familiar with Usenet, these similarities between the standards and techniques of online debate appear to suggest a universality of not only the principles of democracy, but also the ways in which people across continents use the internet for political conversation.

3. The name of the game

Along with the principles of reciprocity, accountability, and rationality, the meaning of political discussion in the democratic microcosm of Polforum is also being clarified and constantly modified in the course of the conversations. This process is furthermore intertwined with the ongoing interpretation of democratic politics. As the previous section argued, participants evoke and make references to principles of a deliberative ideal of discussion. It is equally or more frequent, however, for them to rely on metaphors of battle, war, games or sports when reflecting on their discussions. These metaphors are rarely elaborated on, rather they pop up across conversations as casual references.

So a rightie participant protested against the opening of a topik on the mistakes the right-wing parties made in the 2002 campaign by saying that it could “supply weapons” for the left-liberals. Another rightie posting in the same topik refers to the “asymmetric warfare” of the political right, someone predicts the continuation of the “struggle (war)” and the maintaining of the “trenches” after the elections. Others talk about the “bloody reality”, the “fierce battle fought” by the political parties that “fills the air with gunpowder”, and the “media front” as a site of struggle. Similarly, military metaphors are applied to the arguments participants have with each other. Publius described the forum

in the aftermath of the 2002 elections as “the more militant blokes from the right” entering the triumphant crowd of the left-liberals, which set off “a proper shooting match”. In the course of a discussion, an opponent can be taunted with using “blank ammunition” to show that his argument failed to hit its target; while “shooting from the hip” is a self-confessed reaction of some participants in handling postings they find particularly annoying. As Frank said, “In spite of, or precisely because the forum is a mere playground, it can easily be transformed into a battleground”.

Sports supply metaphors for both political affiliation (participants refer to the “teams” they “cheer for”) and the conditions of public life (lack of “fair play”, biased “referees”). Among sports, football (soccer) is the most widely used reference point in the discussions, although boxing too is sometimes mentioned when talking about political fights. Political mistakes made by parties and administrations are regularly called “own goals”; the political polarisation of the polity gets compared to the long-standing animosity between two rival Hungarian football clubs; the dullness of the news media is likened to watching England play the last ten minutes of a match they are losing; while the shock of the political right over losing the 2002 elections is compared to Hungary’s losing in the World Cup final match in 1954 and in Marseille in 1974, both of which have caused traumas lasting decades. Games that are sometimes used as metaphors for politics include chess, a game of combinatory skills and strategic thinking. Parties, say participants, should keep in mind in the election campaign that “in chess too you need to be prepared for the most unexpected moves, even if the opponent may not deploy them in the end”. Discussions online also get referred to as “play” or “board games” where participants keep tab of the “score”.

Politika forum as play

The metaphors of war, sports, and gaming in the understandings participants have of their discussion activities raises the intriguing possibility of interpreting the culture of

Polforum as play (Huizinga 2000). As the previous section argued, there are limits to how rationality can unfold in forum discussions, even if it remains a powerful principle that informs conversation. Huizinga's analysis of play as an important constitutive element of human culture also starts out from the premise that "homo sapiens", the wise man naively idealised by 18th-century Enlightenment thinking, is not such an adequate description of humankind after all. Huizinga proposes that "homo ludens" be recognised as man engaged in an activity as important as the creative work of the "homo faber" that came to supplement homo sapiens. In terms of the formal characteristics of play, "we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" (Huizinga 2000) (p. 13).

The first characteristic of play, then, is that it is free action. This is true of Polforum participation, for people enter it voluntarily, out of the desire to participate in it because it brings them pleasure. Reading and writing the forum are also free activities in the sense that they are not obligations or tasks, they are played in leisure time. Many participants log on from work, carving out the minutes and hours of play from their workday. It is a recurring anecdote at the face-to-face meetings how participants must tame their reactions when reading something particularly funny on their office computers in case the boss finds out they are not focusing on work. Laughing out loud at the computer screen is not a reaction other participants would actually see, but the reports of uncontrollable sniggering can make it to the forum postings even in forms of mock protestations to others to stop.

Unlike labour, play is without interest; it realises the ideals of expression and co-habitation, serving goals that are themselves not submitted to purely material interests or the individual gratification of needs. This feature of participation on the forum can be detected negatively, in the separate term people use to brand participants who are suspected to be on party payroll for posting. The term *bértopikoló* means ‘rental contributor’, and such persons are said to be recognisable from their use of a string of nicks, frequently changed but all communicating the same (party politically) loaded message in declarative style, that is without even a pretence of openness to engage in debate with others. The element of the wages as reward is what distinguishes rental contributing from political activism, and it is a serious charge because having a direct financial interest in the discussion is seen to undermine the authenticity of postings.⁵⁴

Third, play is characterised by its separation from ordinary life in time and especially space. The playing field is a secluded and enclosed precinct, subject to its own, separate rules. A fruitful line of criticism directed at *Homo Ludens* suggests, however, that play should be understood not in isolation from or in opposition to the rest of the world, but as “a particular mode of behavior that is coextensive with and reflective of culture as a whole” (Anchor 1978) (p. 89). Play has a double character; players exist simultaneously in two spheres, that of the play and that of the outside world. The player “withdraws temporarily from the real world” and “asserts his freedom by recreating it imaginatively, without losing touch with reality” (p. 92). The play world becomes a symbolic reflection of the world, encoding the meaning of existence in play. The process of logging on to Polforum indicates the passage from ordinary life to the enclosed online precinct. Rather than remaining a field separated from ordinary activities on the same computer or other areas of life on- or offline, however, the forum

⁵⁴ Suspicions of rental contributing on the forum emerged in the upheaval of campaign 2002, when a government body (the Office of the Prime Minister) was accused of being responsible for a quarter of the postings on Politika forum. The charges could not be proved, but the concept has stuck and continues to serve as a rebuke label on Polforum and other discussion forums. When in 2004 I interviewed a senior party official of Fidesz, the party that was originally accused of employing rental contributors, he categorically denied the charges.

remains an enclosed area whose boundaries are nonetheless constantly permeated by other activities participants are involved in. 'Real life' with its colleagues, bosses, or family members becomes temporarily bracketed in play (participants who use the forum at work try to avoid letting their bosses know, while at home they can get complaints from spouses about the time they spend on Polforum, 'away' from domesticity), but it does not disappear. Furthermore, once a participant is logged on, reading and posting messages can become less of an activity with a clear temporal starting and finishing point, and more like a repeated act of submersion. Participants dip in and out of Polforum topik, keeping a browser window set on the forum, often while they are working on other things on their computer and waiting for the machine to complete a task or just wishing to take a break. The technology of the forum also supports the dynamics of entry-exit-reentry, as the software enables asynchronous communication with time lags between postings.

Order and play

The playing field creates Order, and play requires order, for any deviation from it can spoil the play by robbing it of its characteristic. Players who break the rules are spoil-sports, because by refusing to submit themselves to the rules they reveal the relativity of the play world and rob play from its illusion. The spoil-sport undermines the community created in play by destroying its magical world, therefore he must be banished. Banishment can be used on the forum to punish users who violate the rules of discussion. Participants who deliberately or repeatedly obstruct "cultured" discussion may be banned from participation for a day, a week, a month, or permanently. The category of obstruction includes obscenity and aggressive, threatening postings; messages whose content breaks Hungarian law; messages that smear other participants in offensive or obscene ad hominem postings; and postings that are destructive in their content (e.g. off-topik or flood⁵⁵) or in a technical sense (e.g.

⁵⁵ Both terms are used in their original, English version by Hungarian internet users, though 'flood' is sometimes pronounced as [flu:d].

containing JAVA applications, overlong texts, or oversize image files). All of the rules are intended to guard the order of good discussion, but they are not rigid, rather the moderators decide on their application depending on the context in which a message was posted.

It is also possible to bend the rules, but as long as that is done in a consensual or humorous way, it can be kept part of the play. If a word or expression is banned from use, participants can make a sport out of coming up with substitutes, as they did at the end of campaign 2002. Hungary's election law prohibits all political campaign activities in a period starting at 0:00 on the day before the elections. The law also applies to public discussion forums on the internet, and on Index a banner over the forum warns all participants to observe the gag rule in their discussions. In 2002, participants complied like model citizens, heeded the slightest warning to stop forbidden conversations. But in the meantime the partial election results kept circulating via e-mail, and they could not resist to post on the forum the results with periphrastic substitutes for parties. So the right-wing party Fidesz, whose symbol is the colour orange, was mentioned as 'the party not of bananas, nor lemons, but another kind of tropical fruit', a reference that everyone understood and could play along with. In this case of course the rule temporarily altering discussion norms came from the outside of the forum, therefore it is possible to see its creative reworking as the further strengthening of the separation of the play field from the ordinary.

Secrecy and anonymity

The preference for secrecy in play is another manifestation of its exceptional and special situation, and the difference and mysteriousness of play is most striking in masquerades, where the masked and costumed people play and in fact become different beings. This characteristic of play is striking on the forum where 'anonymous' participation is a powerful norm, so much so that Rexaminer, a participant who is notorious for guarding the secret of his offline identity summed up Polforum as "a game whose defining

characteristic is anonymity”. Anonymity, as discussed in Chapter 2, has been found a mixed blessing for the quality of online discussions. In the context of Index, anonymity has time and again produced upheavals, like when a forum dedicated to local issues of a Hungarian town was thrown into crisis when a debate emerged over the relative merits of anonymous participation versus making the use of everyone’s own name the norm (Kumin 2001). In an essay reflecting on the culture of discussions on the forum, a participant wrote that “the anonymity guaranteed by the internet makes participants inclined to forget themselves” (Antlfinger 2002), and many participants would agree with him that the decline of quality on the forum was connected to the discovery of the uses of anonymity.

In the early days of the forum, people tended to use a single nick, which created online personae that were so “stable” participants felt they could engage with each other like with people anywhere. Extended participation on Polforum tended to reduce anonymity. Stable nicks build up a history, and those who have been around for years know each other, or know enough about each other to have a clear idea of who the others are. Apart from political affiliation, they know each other’s profession, age, workplace, often their family background or place of residence, interests, hobbies, pet peeves, tastes in food and drink. “What Shekhina doesn’t know about a nickname, that doesn’t exist” is how Shekhina describes the state of familiarity among discussion veterans. Knowing ‘civilian’ names becomes of secondary importance with such detailed background information, as the episode with Zemlya and 3minor at my first PFT showed.

For veterans, online conversations with known participants are not truly ‘anonymous’, rather played out like a masquerade where the nicks serve as masks, but that is simply a part of the choreography of engaging with each other within the different order of the forum. Yet the secrecy afforded by nicks is one of the cardinal rules, and the punishment for revealing

IRL⁵⁶ information about another nick is instant banishment. Banishment, however, can only apply to a nick, and as mrsnorris explained, “You then come back under another nick, and if you’re in luck, you’re not unmasked and stay under that nick. If not, then you make a third one. I mean, it’s never happened yet that somebody had been banished and wasn’t back under a reserve nick within half an hour”. The ethnography of the Törzsasztal forum on Index describes how the decoding of second nicks is a non-stop “game” the community can never get bored of (Gelléri 2001). The same is true for Politika forum, where second nicks are often created for venting anger in harsh terms. A nick can have a reputation built on being a knowledgeable, reasonable, and level-headed participant; it is better for him or her to guard this respectability and be unreasonable under a second nick. This was the motivation of one of my interviewees, a young rightie participant. He aims for reasoned argumentation as byfur but uses another nick for declarative postings – although he felt it important to note in the interview that “I can’t shed my skin, so there isn’t such a great distance between my two “selves” after all”.

The slanging-match

The use of multiple nicks can also be traced back to a strategic imperative of conjuring up a platoon of supporters. Percolator, who is famous for his ruthless debating style, elaborated on this strategy: if people participate in the discussions under several nicks simultaneously, they may imitate a “virtual consensus” of agreement with their own opinion, which “obviously undermines the debate position of the opponent”. Such strategic thinking shows that Polforum participation can be quite competitive, another feature that connects its culture to play. The essence of play can be described as “there is something at stake” (Huizinga 2000) (p. 49), and the concept of victory is very closely linked to it. Victory, says Huizinga, prevails only if we play against somebody else, and in the end we stay standing as

⁵⁶ Hungarian internet users, including the participants on Polforum, use the English acronym for ‘in real life’, pronounced as [i:erel].

winner in the ring. The need to excel, to prove that we are the best, and gain recognition for it are primary desires. To be the first means that we did better than others, but in order to be the first we also need to look the first; and contest is a way of proving our primacy. Victory brings more than the defeat of the opponent, gaining the upper hand generates glory, prestige, and honour that are also transferable to others in the group to which we belong.

The textually constructed world of Polforum makes all online fights fought in words, and participants mobilise a broad repertoire in their verbal sparring, from carefully measured, precise, expert arguments to harsh, ad hominem reviling. The basic rules of the contest are laid down in the moderation guidelines, but the characteristics of each fight become clarified as the exchange unfolds. It is not only the outcome that is unknown at the outset, but there is similar uncertainty about what the play itself will be. The ideals of participants and the traditions of Polforum allow both democratic deliberation and a form of contest that recalls the archaic practices of slanging-matches as the way of settling disputes.

In a battle of words, the strongest and angriest reviling wins, and the contest is comprised of the struggle to surpass each other in hurling select vituperations.⁵⁷ Elements like humour, satire, parody, proverbs, outbursts of anger, ignoring the other, contemptuousness, shouting are part of this play. On Polforum, all of these elements are used with relish by most people. Participation is an intellectual sport, aimed at presenting the winning arguments, thereby proving the primacy of the individual participant and his or her political 'camp'. All disputes start with an implicit challenge issued to forum dwellers who disagree with the participant who makes a claim. Occasionally, the challenge is made explicitly: "Why, don't you agree this is the case? Convince me", but the forceful articulation of a (polarised) position on a contested issue signals the same.

⁵⁷ The connection between online slanging-matches and contemporary practices of the verbal duel is made explicitly by Dery (1994): "In some ways, flame wars are a less ritualized, cybercultural counterpart to the African-American phenomenon known as "the dozens", in which duelists one-up each other with elaborate, sometimes rhyming gibes involving the sexual exploits of each other's mothers" (p.4-5).

Belittling the opponent is an important part of this contest, and a diverse set of tools, linguistic and rhetorical, are used by participants with that intention. Used sarcastically, terms of endearment become belittling.⁵⁸ Intentionally ruined spelling too can be used to mark the incorrectness or stupidity of an argument (as in writing “newyorktelavivaxis” in an otherwise grammatically correct posting to mock antisemitic conspiracy theories). Spelling is also a way of getting around the moderation rules that prohibit profanities. Mild swear words can avoid getting deleted by the moderators if they are abbreviated (e.g. “SZ.h.”) or spelt slightly differently, substituting special symbols and characters for some of the letters. Regular examples include “f*SZ” or “f@SZ”, “SZ*r” or “SZ@r”, different forms of “b@SZ”, where the use of the @ sign also highlights the online context in which the words appear. Apart from serving as a trick to avoid moderation, preventive misspelling can create instant linguistic humour, thereby removing some of the edge of the insult wrapped in the profanity.

Belittling can also be expressed in straightforward name-calling (for example, using ‘commie’ or ‘fascist’ to denote political actors or forum participants), questioning the intellectual capacity of the opponent (“You fool”; “Brainless worm... Blustering without having a minimum of information to form an opinion”), or insisting on lowercase spelling for proper names of public figures or forum nicks. Alternatively, unnecessary uppercasing can achieve belittling by ironic aggrandisement:

tuono

I read your self-introduction [on the nick data sheet], oh You Vates,
You Origo, You Non-Appealable ToweringOnForm.

BAREFACED LIE

⁵⁸ Most of these terms (e.g. “cuncuska”, “husika”, “kisbutus”, “picike”, “cicám”, “pirinyó szívem”, “mütyürkém”) do not translate well into English, but they can be approximated by pet names like “little fool”, “my kitten”, “my tiny heart”, “little one”, etc.

Are you in prayer, or what?

tuono

Whaddayafink?

The exchange shows that sarcasm can provide an independent (that is, independent of the content of the claims that provoked it) line in the reviling-match. It is an elegant way of handling it to respond in like tone, instead of getting angry as happens in many other instances. An angry response to sarcastic taunts betrays that the opponent managed to ruffle the other's feathers, in other words managed to score.

The most refined ways of insulting an opponent appear in postings that mock and taunt while on the surface observing all forms of politeness. Shekhina, who makes it a priority not to use expletives, described a clear victory she won over an opponent in a verbally nonviolent way: "It is possible to insult people in a way that they can find nothing in it that would call for moderation. A clear example is when our LOIS recently started having fun under a nick like mrsmorris, pretending to be mrsnorris. It was obvious that it was her, but she was fooling around in the PFT topik and I told her, 'OK, one more move like this, and I'll let you loose among the hungry tomcats, I made you a prostitution licence with the phone number of Index so if they find your pelt they can return it'. Now that woman got so offended, even though there was nothing to moderate in this, and theoretically, I was talking to a cat, but she was so miffed she gave up using the nick and she hasn't been back in the topik since. You get more refined here over the years. Anyway, you can learn a lot, scores, about dispute culture and dispute technique." In this example, Shekhina is retelling the story of a major victory of hers. In her account, she outsmarted LOIS because she was not taken in by the deceptive mrsmorris nick, she demonstrated argumentation superiority by staying cool and level-headed in delivering her taunt, and she secured a tangible victory when she managed to drive her opponent off the field.

“Discursive machismo” vs. cooperation

The insinuation coated in Shekhina’s formally unobjectionable postings was of course sexual in nature, unusual only because the exchange occurred between two women. Women are a minority among participants on Polforum where the dominant culture supports the kind of competitiveness that is described as “discursive machismo” (Gambetta 1998). The cultural values of discursive machismo are connected to beliefs about the structure of knowledge that are holistic or indexical: the knowledge of something is a sign of knowledge of the whole, while ignorance of something stands for a lack of culture. Therefore it is imperative to avoid being seen as ignorant in forums where the culture of indexical knowledge reigns, which is conducive to expressing strong opinions on everything at the outset.

The holistic approach thus opens up all areas of knowledge to the same macho discursive treatment. On Polforum, anything can become the ground for contest, including sexuality. When male potency provides additional material for give-and-take in ad hominem discussions, discussion threads can turn into male locker-room banter (or at least they resemble the image I have of these). Participants bandy around sexual frustration as an explanation for the aggression and contemptibility of others:

DUMBO

Toni is already a brave guy or gal, I haven’t figured it out yet.

If she’s a gal I’ll help her forget her anxieties.:O))))

Life’s a bonk, parties may come, parties may go, I just carry on bonking. Long live the homeland and firm tits.

Paroxysm

Fear not, have a fuck! (Sorry. Based on “Make love not war!”) :)

Ribentrop

Looks like our friend Toni has finally gone to get laid. So much the better for everyone!

Toni

idiots, check my homepage, it says ANTHONY which is a man's name, isn't it

what're you playing at with this bonking, what's that got to do with anything?

Ribentrop

Stop! Though his style is feminine, he's a male individual. See his homepage.

DUMBO

And I wanted to help the poor thing.

Now I'm left on my own, I'll be forced to touch myself. Toni that wasn't nice of you!! You're nasty!! No more advice!

And so the exchange goes on, in like vein, until the participants decide that this is becoming a "sex topik" and abandon it or switch to more interesting issues to discuss. The topik withered away after less than 200 postings, which shows that its contributors quickly grew tired of taunting the topik opener, especially after a handful of them could feel they as an ad hoc group had demonstrated their point. But the exchange shows how easily sexual prowess is mobilised as a reference point for discussion contest in a predominantly masculine environment.

Discursive machismo, however, can be tempered by the dictates of cooperation. If a participant requests assistance in a topik, he or she will almost certainly get it, often from more than one source. Participants can help each other locate sources of information or data that are brought up in the course of a discussion; they can help those who are unfamiliar with

the issues discussed by providing explanations of the background, significance, and meaning of the phenomenon discussed; or they can help each other out if someone is less competent in the uses of technology. It is possible that a competitive element remains in the processes of assistance, but then the contest is not between the participant who sought help but between the competent providers of that assistance. For example, in a topik dedicated to the mock maligning of Hungary's Socialist prime minister, I made a joking reference to the label D-209. The label became attached to the prime minister when it was revealed soon after the elections in 2002 that during his time as a member of former communist administrations he also held a position in the secret service (a fact he kept secret from the voters).

Ildikó [válasz erre](#) | [adatok](#) | [e-mail](#) 2002-12-14 03:20:40 (36)
D209 fúúúúúúúúúú (I can't make my letters fancy yet, but I wrote it loud).
[\[előzmény : \(33\) Xxxxx Xxxxx, 2002.12.14 03:15\]](#)

xxxxx2 [válasz erre](#) | [adatok](#) | [e-mail](#) 2002-12-14 03:23:15 (37)
Here's fancy for you:
D209 fúúúúúúúúúú
[\[előzmény : \(36\) Ildikó, 2002.12.14 03:20\]](#)

Ildikó [válasz erre](#) | [adatok](#) | [e-mail](#) 2002-12-14 03:24:19 (39)
Thx!
But why is it in red? That's his ex-colour.
[\[előzmény : \(37\) xxxxx2, 2002.12.14 03:23\]](#)

Xxxxx Xxxxx [válasz erre](#) | [adatok](#) | [e-mail](#) 2002-12-14 03:29:29 (41)
Here you are, ina different colour:
D209 fúúúúúúúúúú
[\[előzmény : \(39\) Ildikó, 2002.12.14 03:24\]](#)

xxxxx2 [válasz erre](#) | [adatok](#) | [e-mail](#) 2002-12-14 03:38:26 (45)
D209 fúúúúúúúúúú
[\[előzmény : \(41\) Xxxxx Xxxxx, 2002.12.14 03:29\]](#)

Xxxxx Xxxxx [válasz erre](#) | [adatok](#) | [e-mail](#) 2002-12-14 03:41:08 (47)
Hmmm... Not a bad banner. I mean like seckojedno... :-)
[\[előzmény : \(45\) xxxxx2, 2002.12.14 03:38\]](#)

xxxxx2 [válasz erre](#) | [adatok](#) | [e-mail](#) 2002-12-14 03:50:29 (49)
seckojedno

The point of this exchange, in which my conversation partners were from the ‘left-liberal’ Polforum camp, was not political preferences, rather the way I was granted assistance when I revealed my technological incompetence. During this period in the life of the forum, the software of the discussion did not allow the composition of messages with the ease of a word processor. Changing font size and colour, frames or background, as well as inserting pictures into postings required familiarity with Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML), a skill I was missing but the other two participants were very good at employing. The way of providing assistance then also became a friendly contest of competence between them.

‘Creative writing’

Technological competence can also involve elements of creativity, another area that invites participants to join in (friendly) contest. Computer-manipulated images, montages are excellent forms of political jokes and satire, but Polforum participants, who are otherwise familiar with these either as producers or more commonly as viewers, and who understand them to be an integral part of political expression, do not regularly post them to topik. Of the arts, literature is the predominant form they make part of the discussions. Literature is present on Polforum in different ways. First, it is a field where competence is expected or can be challenged. References to Hungarian and international literary works and authors can emerge casually in the online political discussions, and it is a testimony to a participant’s intellectual refinement how well he or she understands and uses them. Not having a formal college education in the arts is no excuse either, it is simply part of the cultural standards to have this knowledge. Second, the literary is present on Polforum in the form of extending the discursive repertoire participants can draw on. Parody, pastiche, poetry, song, and the chastushka⁵⁹ all

⁵⁹ Defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica as “a rhymed folk verse usually composed of four lines. The chastushka is traditional in form but often has political or topical content” (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article->

make occasional appearances in postings. They can be applied to ridiculing political speech, as in the topik titled “Let’s talk politics in verse!” where poems that are part of the national literary canon and the lyrics of popular songs are re-written to convey political criticism. Dabbling in poetry is not limited to the topik dedicated specifically to this practice, and brief satirical verse can appear in the course of any conversation.

The excursions into literature are not very frequent (the “Let’s talk politics in verse!” topik attracted a mere 118 postings between 2000 and 2004), but they are considered an adequate form of political expression. Nor is this phenomenon exclusive to Polforum, as the use of humorous poems and haiku were also found to produce and mark group cohesion in some Usenet discussions (Phillips 1996). Literary expression adds another strong element of play to Polforum discussions, performing a social and political function Huizinga recognised poetry to have alongside the aesthetic one. According to purely aesthetic criteria, the poetry that appears on Polforum is not necessarily beautiful – in fact it is often dreadful. But the impromptu versifying is pleasing in its combination of entertainment, artistry, doctrine, persuasion, and competition, which also make it a political activity besides play.

The intrusions of the literary have no immediate rational or utilitarian functions in policy analysis or winning political arguments. However, they are integral to the ‘intelligentsia’ tradition of public life that prevailed under communist rule. In a society with a non-market economy and no democratic rights for the polity, it was possible to maintain that literature and the arts mattered beyond the realm of aesthetics, that they had great political significance.⁶⁰ Based on the postings that include snippets of autobiographical data, as well as the PFT meetings I attended and the interviewees I met, most participants on Politika forum belong to age groups of 30+. Their political and cultural socialisation occurred in an era when

9124837), or as a Hungarian literary site states, chastushka can serve as ad hoc lines of verse for agitation (<http://ww.literatura.hu/lexikon/c.htm>) – both sites last accessed on July 5, 2006.

⁶⁰ The institution of communist censorship, the centralised controlling mechanisms of cultural life, and the political upheavals generated by the clashes between the art communities and the communist bureaucracy attest to this significance.

the ‘intelligentsia’ tradition was still strong, and it can surface naturally when they engage in discussion with people who have similar background. When I interviewed him, a Socialist politician – who for a while had been very active on Polforum and even attended one of the PFTs accompanied by a leggy blond girlfriend several years his junior – described the connection he saw between the intelligentsia tradition and the “subculture” of the forum in rather uncharitable terms:

Alexei: “They are basically declass , miffed intellectuals... I mean people who used to hold a promise, but whose ambitions were frustrated – that’s a category, there are people like that. Well I wouldn’t dare set up categories for the young, because for them [participation on the forum] comes from, I don’t know, a desire for adventure. But mostly, mostly it’s intellectuals, with very bad living standards, this shows in their clothes, in the way they look, how unkempt they are.”

Ildik : “Even though the internet means expenses.”

Alexei: “Well, many, or I believe most, use it at work. There are very few who have their own [internet connection].”

Ildik : “Did you come to this conclusion from the face-to-face meeting, or already from the earlier postings on the forum?”

Alexei: “And the slurs, I mean one could feel it from the postings that there were a few biographical features like, ‘son of a bitch, my salary is 57 thousand forints’⁶¹, so one could see from the personal utterances. Not all of them, just that [group].”

Of course, Alexei ran afoul many forum participants for his postings that were written in a style that would not take printer’s ink, which probably contributed to his recollections. He was right, however, in pointing out that there is no necessary link between old-fashioned cultural capital and material, financial well-being. He was also correct to observe that forum

⁶¹ In 2002-2003, the minimum wage in Hungary was 50 thousand forints per month.

participants do not need a refined dress sense to shine online – the latter observation in fact adds to the arguments for understanding Polforum as also a masquerade.

Popular culture on the forum

The intelligentsia tradition also carries an element of cultural conservatism, in the sense of maintaining a hierarchy between elite and mass culture, with products of the first meriting praise and those of the latter scorned. Traces of this elitism are there on Polforum, manifest in the way that knowledge about highbrow works of art is seen as a legitimate ground for contest (along with a deep contempt for mass cultural products like reality shows or tabloid publications). At the same time, the author with arguably the biggest influence on the shaping of the forum from its early days has been Jenő Rejtő whose novels were written as light entertainment, popular adventure stories during the 1930s and '40s.⁶² Rejtő's books observe formulaic plots, often unfolding in the French foreign legion against a background of colonial machinations, or the underworld of major international port cities, with military and/or aristocratic codes of honour and a love interest giving meaning to life and civilisation under the deadly tropical skies.

Descriptions of the plots or settings of Rejtő's novels, however, fail to do justice to the genius of the man whose books became cult classics for generations of Hungarian readers (two of his works, including *Dirty Fred the Captain*, made it to the Top100 list of the Hungarian version of the Big Read contest in 2005). Rejtő took the fashionable adventure novel formulae of the age and recast them through rare linguistic inventiveness as parodies of

⁶² For a taste of Rejtő, here is a synopsis of the plot of one of his best-known novels: "Sir! I've come for my knife!", is the opening line of his novel *Piszkos Fred, a kapitány* [Dirty Fred the Captain]. Jimmy Ear-to-Ear removes the mother-of-pearl-handled knife from the back of his victim (despite the protests of the man), and he signs up to the luxury boat *Honolulu-Star* to replace both the stoker and the waiter he had knocked out cold in the pub brawl that led to the knifing. On board the ship he meets Dirty Fred who is on his way to the Happiness Islands as a stowaway and as a personal guard for the young Archduke St. Anioni de Vicenzo Y Galapagos. During the voyage, Jimmy Ear-to-Ear agrees with the archduke to switch roles for a few days. The archduke begins to explore the underworld in Singapore, and soon he earns himself a reputation as an excellent fighter. Meanwhile Jimmy Ear-to-Ear too relies more and more on his fist in the maze of governing and court intrigue. The archduke stumbles on a conspiracy against his kingdom, and he sets out to get his empire back with Dirty Fred in tow. Still incognito, he marries Redtalon, the daughter of the leader of the conspiracy, gets his island empire back from Jimmy, and all live happily ever after.

their fictional world, while also maintaining the traditions of the genres that make an enjoyable read. The key to Rejtő's lasting appeal, apart from the carnivalesque parody of his stories and the hilarity his language, expressions, and neologisms provoke, has been summarised as:

“I have a feeling that we all too often confuse what is human with what is rational. The moment we identify the human with pure rationality, we ourselves become machinery, while Rejtő's characters are trying to guide us to allow ourselves a bit of a monomania, to be a bit irrational, to be a bit crazy, ergo to be human” (Sántha 2003) (p. 94).

This fictional world is perfect material for play, and it appears in several ways on the forum. In fact, the adoption of Rejtő's world predates the genesis of Politika forum, for it appeared already in the first, non-political Törzsasztal community of Index, so it was already something of an online forum tradition that could be carried over to Politika forum. A number of participants chose as their nicks the names of characters from Rejtő's books⁶³. The choice of Rejtő nicks does not mean that participants necessarily act accordingly online, that is, they do not try to playact as the logic of the fictional character would dictate. There is though a notable exception: Wágner úr, the man who acts as liaison between the management of Index and the forum communities. The fictional character of Wágner is best known for his permanent state of severe and merry drunkenness, and the Wágner úr of the forum stays true to this role in every posting he writes. He writes as if he was drunk, for example during campaign 2002 in a topik asking whether Polforum has an impact on the elections:

“Polforum has a sizeable impact on voter choice.... hicc, sorry... ye just stick yer nose in here and choose instantly... Beer, but make it a lot!

Cheers!” The same style and content remains constant in Wágner's postings, which never engage with the political statements in the discussions, for his role is to be peacekeeper-

⁶³ Nicks based on Rejtő's books include Wágner úr, Trebitsch, Wendriner Piroska, Csülök, anna alvarez, Gombpereg, Pác Tivald, Probatbicol, Vanek, etc.

administrator, and that allows only the mask of the funny character whose head is filled to the brim with thoughts of beer. Wágner úr – who used to work as a Russian-Hungarian translator for the military, which also means that he was trained in drinking by one of the toughest international schools – stays true to character at face-to-face meetings too, guzzling beer at PFTs from a special, pitcher-sized mug. But even when drunk for real, he remains apolitical, a kind of benign outsider to Polforum squabbling (who is nevertheless powerful with special online licences as forum administrator).

Apart from nicks, the characteristic expressions and phrases from Rejtő's books can also pop up in any conversation on the forum, lightening the arguments. Most importantly, his fictional world provides a code of conduct that can be evoked in settling disputes: the pub brawl. The call for humanity that is so central to Rejtő's fictional world is manifest in the rules of the fisticuffs he describes. Rejtő's underworld characters earn respect from their society for how well they can throw a punch; the beautifully executed jab, cross, hook, or uppercut can make a man. Knifing is as far as the arsenal of modern warfare is allowed to intrude in the world of decent rogues, where a 'real man' proves himself by his artisanship of the punch. It is this fight ethos that can permeate the verbal brawling between established leftie and rightie Polforum participants who mutually recognise each other as worthy opponents. Anjun explained this in a topik to someone who suggested that promises of brawling are not conducive to good debate: "Brother Freddy, if there is someone who likes brawling, that's me; both for real and virtually. But: with old strovacheks⁶⁴ – those who matter at all – we can have divine brawls – and occasionally we indulge ourselves in such sinful passions –, but still we do not become mortal enemies."

⁶⁴ 'Strovachek' is a classic expression of Rejtő's to describe a friend/colleague/partner.

Thus the (verbally represented) violence of the brawl that would in principle exclude deliberation can, in the cultural context of Polforum, actually be an important indication of recognition and acceptance, extended to those who have proven worthy of the partnership involved in exchanging punches. The verbal punch-up can proceed according to the rules of fair play whose spirit allows opponents to go back to friendly jesting in the breaks from their matches. They may even request and offer their assistance in solving offline personal problems, helping each other out if their jobs make help possible. Friendliness does not require agreement, and sociable conversation in the breaks from forum feuding does not mean that one party or the other managed to win over the opponent to his or her position. Nor does agreement on issues dissolve the barriers between political camps. But as long as it observes the code of chivalry, enmity can in fact be a constructive element on Polforum. In the interviews, rightie veteran GFerro said about Anjun that he was really fond of him, even though Anjun is just an eighth-district⁶⁵ scoundrel. Anjun mused about a hard-core rightie participant he usually found himself in complete agreement with, but with whom they would “otherwise club each other to death, throttle each other in a teacup”. Shekhina talked about the good old intimate loathing that binds her to some of her opponents, including Frank: “At a certain level, if they are not too extremist, the great opponents are just somehow there, I know what they are going to write... it’s predictable, it includes a sense of security. It was Frank who wrote he could no longer imagine the forum without Shekhina and mrsnorris. These are the issues, this is what will spark a dustup, I know when I write the posting what his response will be, and what my reply will be to all this, and so it all manages to create a sense of the homey.” Similarly, she thinks about LOIS as an opponent with whom they occasionally turn mutually murderous, but otherwise they cooperate in work, talk on the

⁶⁵ The 8th district of Budapest has a reputation for notoriety, with higher crime rates and rougher street culture than in most other parts of the city.

phone, and help out each other. LOIS too describes their relationship as “we quarrel, but we can’t live without each other”.

In the posting quoted above, Anjun also contrasts brawling as a gesture of recognition with denying it from unworthy participants: “But I am not fighting these worms. Let them bugger off to... wherever. I have only one thing to say to these, f* off [literally: I send them back into their whore of a mother’s]”. The opinions that for Anjun exclude themselves from a manly fight are sordid ones rooted in “blind hate”. In this particular topic, these included views that claimed the 2003 disaster of the *Columbia* space shuttle was a sign from God that America should end its aggressive foreign policy, or the views that made jokes about the nationality and religion of the Israeli astronaut on board the shuttle.

From the point of my analysis, it is irrelevant whether Anjun’s interpretation of the jokes as hateful and inhuman was absolutely correct. There are different interpretive frameworks for disaster jokes in the social sciences; and Hungarian reactions as reflected in the jokes that began circulating in the wake of 9/11 were found to be focusing not so much on the destruction brought along by the catastrophe as its potential consequences and the possibility of a global war (Császai 2002). Anjun, however, is not a social scientist. One of his degrees is in law, he runs a tax consultant agency, he is a computer expert who measures the capacity of his machines in terrabytes, he had served in the army (has two bullet wounds), plus he spent several years of his adolescence fantasising about space travel. The shuttle disaster for him thus felt partly personal; moreover, the forum history of the participant who started the thread of discussion critical of America and Israel supported Anjun’s inferences. For him, the dehumanised treatment of the tragedy manifest in the failure to pay respect to the victims disqualified those who advocated these views from the discussion.

The hateful, the blindly prejudiced, the racist, the antisemitic, or the fanatic are inexcusable according to the post-war western consensus. They are also culturally unacceptable because they do not observe fair play: they consider the friend-foe relationship paramount, and they only recognise the gratification of their own group as the highest goal. The play element of culture “must not consist in the darkening or debasing of standards set up by reason, faith or humanity” (Huizinga 2000) (p. 211). Without the play element, the culture of Polforum cannot be sustained, just as democracy cannot be sustained without the civilising force of fair play, conventions that are consciously established and voluntarily adhered to, and the knowledge of winning and losing graciously (Anchor 1978).

I have tried to make an argument for interpreting the culture of political discussion on Polforum as play. I also believe that the argument could be made that the ‘name of the game’ on the forum is democracy, that is, participants have created an online community they are trying to run on democratic principles. There is a discursive enterprise, and the rules that support it include freedom and equality, accountability, reciprocity, and reasoned argumentation – the ideals that are integral to a deliberative conception of democracy. This is remarkable because the rules, both in their formal, codified and their informally observed versions, are as much the products of the democratic ideals participants bring to the forum as of trial-and-error, piecemeal rule-making that has been shaped through constant reinterpretation and application in the course of discussion. Conversational rules or the standards of conduct serve the purpose of maintaining communication among members of a newsgroup (McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith 1995). If the project, as on Polforum, is to maintain political conversation, and make it as meaningful for the participants as possible, these are the tried and tested principles to rely on. The discussions will not produce consensus, indeed they can increase the amount of disagreement. At the same time, they can

eventually help handle moral disagreement among participants whose conversation make dissensus informed, enabling the emergence of political community – manifest most clearly when the forum is under attack from ‘the outside’. Moreover, the deliberative features of Polforum emerge and operate in a sphere that is not connected to political decision-making.

All of this brings us inevitably to the question: how does Polforum relate to democracy and politics in Hungary? In the next sections, I will try to find an answer to this question.

4. Politika forum and the Hungarian public sphere

Play as it unfolds on Politika forum thus can be understood as a symbolic representation of the meaning of democracy in Hungary, a representation that is created through the ongoing interpretations participants make of public life and their forum participation simultaneously. In this process, politics is revealed as a contested terrain, with the contest aimed at defining and defending particular conceptions of the political world. As the previous sections have argued, the ‘outside world’ of national and international politics is present in many ways and shapes on the forum: it supplies subject matter for discussion, information sources and arguments, standards and norms for maintaining the conversation, and so on. The forum, however, is not a simple reflection of ideas and relationships outside its precinct, rather it reconfigures the elements of Hungarian politics in novel constellations in the context created by the culture of the forum. What is less clear is how, and if at all, the relationship works the other way, that is the influence Politika forum exerts and the role it plays in the Hungarian public sphere. This question can be approached within the context of publicity or publicness, itself a complex term (Heller 2006; Weintraub 1997) made even more so by the ambiguities involved in the practices and perceptions of online participation. The internet blurs the boundaries dividing interpersonal and mass communication, which

undermines traditional boundaries separating the public and private realms, making messages posted to online forums both public and private (Knapp 1997).

Publicity and online talk

The code of moderation, the “Modus Moderandi” makes it clear that all postings on Polforum are public communication. From the participants’ perspective, publicity is manifest mainly in the assumption that their writing has, at least potentially, an audience. The size and composition of this audience, however, is less clear; it is more helpful to conceive of readers as forming different layers within and around the forum. The ongoing commentary, scrutiny, and criticism that messages attract are indications of others’ reading them – this is the first layer of readership, comprised of fellow participants and distinguished by the instant feedback it provides on the content of postings. On the other hand, there is a lingering sense among participants of a wider set of potential readers, people who are lurking on the forum out of habit or professional interest. This second layer of audience includes people from politics and the media, which means the eyeballs monitoring the forum make up in influence what they perhaps lack in number.

The forum is a magnet for aficionados, attracting the attention of print, broadcast, and online journalists, columnists; local and national politicians, has-beens and wannabes. Forum participants can readily produce lists of journalists whom they know to have appeared before or to be still active participating on Polforum. They mention by name mostly columnists, people of left, right, and liberal affiliations who pen opinion pieces or produce partisan television programmes, when they talk about journalists on Polforum. They are also aware of journalists’ monitoring the forum in search of material for articles. Forum discussions sometimes supply copy under the heading of ‘what people on the internet say’, which

amounts to a collection of select quotes from the forum, complete with the nicks who posted them, reprinted in national broadsheets or weeklies.⁶⁶

Apart from direct quotes, participants also talk about cases when they encounter arguments they had seen posted on the forum in the press, with articles sometimes repeating verbatim the evaluation or interpretation nicks produce in their discussion. Their feelings about such attention from the press are mixed; there is an element of recognition in the national media picking up a fellow nick's thoughts, but it is also annoying to have hacks poaching for stories in the easily accessible field of the forum. Some participants go as far as making a connection between the demise of quality discussions and the private agendas of anonymous journalists. Publius for one believes that some "representatives of the media" are attracted to the forum for self-interested reasons, since they stand to lose or gain directly from the outcome of elections. Consequently, they want to use the forum for venting support or criticism for administrations on the one hand, while the forum also helps them generate more publicity for their shows or articles, working as a kind of free advertising board.

Many participants feel that journalists are trying to manipulate the forum for their own purposes. Hints are dropped, bits of information are leaked on the forum before a story breaks in the press. During the period of my active participation, I came across a photographer who announced she was going to be interviewed on television the next day; her appearance was newsworthy for Politika forum because she was going to be interviewed by an infamous Hungarian banker who had mismanaged the funds of a state-owned bank and was at the time on trial but guest-hosted a morning cultural show. On another occasion, I saw the seeds of a

⁶⁶ The emblematic figure of this practice was Reginald, a right-wing columnist who had been a founder participant boasting the prestigious early registration number 43. He was the original "scavenger of sentences" on the forum, exasperating and annoying many participants, but also making himself "an institution", "a separate chapter" in the history of Polforum. When the news of his illness reached the forum, veteran participants of all political colour flocked to post 'get well' messages for him. After he was discharged from hospital, he appeared in the topik addressed to him and thanked people for their good wishes – and then they all proceeded with their verbal battles, the taunting and the mockery (including the ridiculing of Reginald's columns published in a radical right-wing weekly). When Reginald died in 2004, condolences and farewell messages from his veteran partners and opponents were posted on the forum.

major political scandal sown in a topik when a serious accusation concerning a successful right-wing mayor was first posted on the forum by a brand new nick, to be picked up later that day by the news section of Index with the forum named as its source, and then moving on to the rest of the national media. In conversations, other participants could recall a number of occasions when they had read about stories first on the forum days before they came out in the media, although their sense of the forum serving as a ground for political gossip is actually more acute than their recollection of specific examples of such stories. Then there are journalists who are intent on using the forum as their sounding board by making sure that the topik dealing with issues important for them stay on top. Since the opening page of the forum lists the titles of topik according to how active they are, how many fresh contributions they attract, it is possible to manipulate the agenda of discussion by keeping pet issues among the most actively discussed topik – or, as Publius says, by trying to “italicise what needs to be italicised” on the forum.

Apart from journalists, a number of political decision-makers and public officials are also known to take an interest in the forum. There are people like DeLex from all four parties in Parliament, active card-carrying members who may hold minor positions in the party hierarchy, but they are not politicians full-time; their party work comes second to their day jobs. On the forum, they tend to advocate the positions of their parties or political bloc, but since their membership and affiliation are common knowledge, that is a transparent setup accepted by all. On the other hand, it can happen that a disgruntled member of a party takes his criticism to the forum. This is what happened in March 2004 when veteran participant Figgs Pasteur, a geochemist and former expert on party constitutional and election law affairs at the Socialist Party, opened a topik on Polforum to publish an article critical of the party. As he explained in his opening commentary in the topik, the 1,330-word article was an opinion piece submitted to *Népszabadság*, Hungary’s largest national broadsheet known for

its support of the Socialists. The section editor accepted the article, but one day before its publication the editor-in-chief of the paper rejected it, claiming that it was badly written, unfair, and superficial. Figgs Pasteur invited forum participants to read his piece and judge for themselves whether the editor-in-chief was right. His gesture produced a rare consensual topik with participants from left and right equally praising it, as much for the critical, self-reflexive position of the author as for the actual criticisms he articulated.

Besides loyal and critical rank-and-file party members, there are also a few nationally known politicians who make appearances on the forum. They usually showed up on their own initiative, for even though by 2002 political parties were beginning to extend their campaigns to the internet, they had no centrally developed strategies for it, so individual candidates were free to use it as they saw fit. There was a minor wave of MPs from the Socialist Party registering under their own name and entering discussions in the runup to campaign 2002, and a few figureheads from the liberal party were also known or rumoured to participate both under their own name and under nicks.

Participants tend to agree that for national politicians the forum must provide good preparatory ground for campaigning because opponents raise criticisms from all angles and in all styles. This is also how Alexei, the Socialist MP participant explained why he persisted on Polforum: “I had a special reason for continuing this. At the time [late 2001] I was still a beginner politician so to speak, I got into it in '98. I was still a beginner MP, and to me this was a terribly good school for how to react to vile, derogatory, below-the-belt blows and accusations. It happened that I tried to give a response to the same sassing using several tones, with different emphases, even in 4-5 versions. I did this for myself, for the sake of my writing and debate skills, and I did develop around 100-150 standard responses for reacting immediately to unfounded accusations. I mean this is very helpful, and I was told by several people that it showed even in my television appearances that I have improved a lot, because

I'm not embarrassed in case of unfair accusations. What's more, I have a quite *schlagfertig* way of debating, depending on the ratings of the programme, its scheduling, the presence or absence of a debate partner, a million things. Obviously, this could be polished further, but even so, I have shown progress from zero. So, that's directly why I did it, for myself... and for what to expect, I mean I was preparing for a campaign, the next campaign. It worked, very much. Very very very much."

MP Alexei certainly gave as good as he got and sometimes more on the forum. Initially, he was granted respect for participating under his own name, but his postings when responding to attacks tended to be over the top, rough, loaded with obscenities. Many of his postings got deleted by the moderators, and at a face-to-face meeting he was given a friendly warning by Anjun and Wágner to tone himself down, otherwise they would be forced to "run him over". Alexei's activity on Polforum was causing some embarrassment for his party. A veteran forum participant, Aniseed said Alexei "got the tone wrong, took more liberties than he should've", and this allowed other participants to tar the party with the same brush. Aniseed works as the assistant of a leader of the Socialist Party, and she usually feels duty bound to stand up for her employers, but in this case she had difficulties doing so: "one thought one should defend him, but it really was indefensible, because he posted such stupid things, I guess because he believed this was the adequate tone". Alexei mentioned that the head of his party advised him to spend his time with "more sensible things instead of bickering with all these fascist idiots", but the party leaders let him be the ultimate judge of whether he should continue participating. The right-wing press had a field day printing Alexei's postings and running a smear campaign by falsely attributing an unacceptably offensive claim about the then-prime minister's wife to him, a claim that originated with someone else but Alexei made the mistake of referring to it in a posting without quotation marks, therefore it seemed attributable to him. In the end, however, the bad publicity did not

make a difference, for Alexei won the elections in his constituency (and stopped participating on Polforum, a move he justified by his busy schedule after the Socialists got into government).

Alexei's experiences confirm what previous research into Politika forum concluded about discussions having a great degree of autonomy, maintained regardless of the presence of a public figure⁶⁷ (Kiss and Boda 2005). Deference would be antithetical to the culture of the forum, and anyone showing signs of it would be mercilessly teased by the others online. At the same time, I have seen participants flock to a member of the liberal party at a PFT, some of them getting perilously close to fawning over the young man. The man who enjoyed such attention at the PFT was cavalry, an old participant on Polforum whose involvement in national politics was a direct outcome of his participation on the forum.

Cavalry states that he has always supported Hungary's liberals, defending them staunchly in the discussions too. Then one day in 2001, he got into a debate with right-wing participants about the squandering that had characterised a liberal-led ministry in 1994-98. Cavalry argued that the charges were unfounded, but he did not have the facts to support his position, until he received an e-mail from someone claiming to be the former minister and head of the liberal party. The former minister wrote to him to say that although he had no wish to enter the discussion, he liked the way cavalry was trying to help, and he supplied facts and data in support of cavalry's arguments. The identity of the sender of the e-mail was confirmed over the phone to be that of the former minister, and cavalry was so impressed that a party leader would make the effort to follow forum discussions without giving in to the

⁶⁷ The politician participating in the topik Kiss and Boda analyse is not Alexei, but he is also an MP of the Socialist Party.

urge to respond, and that he would place his trust in a nick⁶⁸, that when Net Party, the online department of the liberals was established, he decided to join.

This has not been the only time Polforum served as an indirect recruitment ground for Hungarian politics. Byfur also told me he was inspired by his forum participation to join the large right-of-centre party Fidesz. In his case, it was another forum participant who let it slip in a discussion that he was a member of the party, which got Byfur thinking: “Why shouldn’t I join, when a nick who is roughly my age, similarly informed, could say a nick like me is also a member?” In other cases that I am familiar with, prominent participants ended up taking assignments from political parties, developing and administering political websites; one of the popular columnists of the only right-wing national broadsheet was recruited from the forum by an assistant editor-in-chief who judged the long, comprehensive, and level-headed summaries the nick posted to the forum worthy of national publication; while some participants claim to have repeatedly refused offers from the media to have their own column or radio show.

All of these stories show Polforum as a sphere where the distance between political decision makers, the media, and ‘lay’ citizens can be bridged. The mixing and mingling on the forum remains strictly informal, however; contact tends to stay sporadic and semi-secret, involving individual nicks but not the forum as a whole in an officially institutionalised way.⁶⁹ These practices of communication on Polforum are made possible precisely because the forum has an ambiguous position within the Hungarian public sphere: it is part of it, yet it is

⁶⁸ It should be noted though that during the telephone conversation it became clear that the party leader knew cavalry’s family, had even dined at his father’s house before. Thus the trust he placed in the nick – whose IRL identity is widely known on the forum – was not entirely of blind faith, rather a move made less risky by indirect familiarity.

⁶⁹ The only time Politika forum, jointly with the other forums on Index, organised an initiative aimed at influencing decision-making was in 2001 when they launched a campaign to have a Budapest street named after Jenő Rejtő and to have his statue erected in a public square. The first part of the campaign was successful, and there is now a street named after Rejtő in the VIIth district of Budapest whose Socialist MP is one of the politicians active on Polforum under his own name; while the foundation set up to raise the money for the statue is still short of its target in 2006.

outside its usual arenas. The ambiguity is reflected in the contradictory perceptions participants have of publicity in relation to the forum. As cellular explained:

“There are participants who take offense at being quoted elsewhere, I mean they consider [Polforum] to be private conversation among friends, and they don’t understand how come their postings perhaps get quoted on other forums. I try to tell them that this is no private conversation, just because there’s ten of us posting, we’re still talking in a shop-window, and from then on anyone can read it, at any time, even years from now, and they can hold us accountable. You have to write with this awareness. A few days ago a participant was completely outraged because after he called a journalist of [a right-wing daily] a Nazi, the paper printed his comment. The anonymous name-caller got offended – well, this is a strange asymmetry, him thinking he could remain a private person despite writing his opinion in public.”

The lingering sense of the internet and the forum as semi-public spheres where anonymity creates favourable conditions to information leaks and political gossip is also evident in the wide-spread perception among participants that Polforum serves as an experimental ground for decision-makers to test ideas. Nearly all of my informants talked about seeing an idea floated on Polforum and becoming news a few days later, provided that the reception on the forum was not too negative. The informal probing of public reactions makes some participants think of the outcome of forum discussions as ‘public opinion’, albeit a very peculiar “sliver of public opinion” that has nothing to do with representative samples but everything to do with instant and usually informed, often professionally sound critiques of ideas from the ‘chattering classes’. These people are a premium audience for politicians and journalists, it is natural therefore that they should take an interest.

Aniseed says that while they were in opposition between 1998-2002, it was part of her job to provide summaries of the forum discussions to the Socialist MP and party leader

she works for. She continued after their 2002 electoral victory to monitor what was said about the MP, printing out the relevant topik and showing her “unless it was particularly disgusting”. The people discussed on the forum also make appearances in the topik dedicated to them. In the topik about Dévényi, an under-secretary from the ministry that announced Dévényi’s appointment showed up with the clear intention of damage control. In another topik discussing a Hungarian-owned cable television channel, the owner of the channel appeared in order to set the record straight on the financing, programming options, and alleged political connections of her company. The appearance of public figures using their own name on the forum is common enough to have merited a separate procedure through which the moderators are able to identify them and changing the participant’s status on his or her data sheet to “ident”.

The semi-public character of the forum also makes it acceptable for political actors to appear on it and make claims, engage in discussions without having to reveal their full name and position, relying on a circumscription of who they are. This was the procedure followed by a young political communication expert who appeared in the topik opened for a level-headed analytical assessment of the mistakes the political right made in their 2002 campaign.⁷⁰ Newsmanager, as he aptly called himself in the topik, had been a participant on Polforum under a different nick, and he could rely on a reference to his forum history to establish the credibility of his new nick. As a member of the Socialist Party’s campaign staff, he was well-placed to provide professional insight into the campaign, and he shared inside details of their strategy with the other participants. This explains why the others (including this delighted researcher) were attracted to the topik,⁷¹ but not why Newsmanager found it

⁷⁰ The topik has become one of the longest-running ones, attracting over 12,200 postings since its 2002 April opening and still active in 2006.

⁷¹ The professionalisation of political communication in Hungary began to emerge from 1998, along with the idea of spin doctoring as a suspect activity for the lack of public control over the influence and power of the managers of campaign and government communications. Newsmanager’s postings on the forum argued for a cool professional view of campaign 2002, consistently shifting the discussion towards a rational, professional

appealing. For him, as he explained in his postings, Polforum was alluring because this is the only outlet where he can take credit for the work he does behind the scenes of political communication:

I'm a political scientist, but I mustn't write. Except for here. (...)
Why am I doing it? Only because I think a lot of people who contributed to the analysis of the campaign have not in concreto seen one from up close, and perhaps I also have points that I could contribute to the analysis. There's also some truth to calling this a bit of the anonymous claiming of authorship. I have a colleague, between the two of us we had written two letters that got distributed in roughly 8 million copies in the name of a citizen known better than us. In my hours of boredom I too am amazed about this.

Besides fellow participants and politicians or journalists, audiences are perceived to be present in a third, vaguer sense for participants. Theoretically, the postings on the forum can be read by anyone, which is captured by cellular's metaphor of discussions in a shop-window. For many participants, this generates a sense of record-keeping, as if the forum was a written account, a chronicle of the age we live in. Anjun, with what he refers to as his "fucking big machine" whose Winchester has huge storage space, saves discussions routinely, archiving conversations on the consideration that "it'll be good as a symptom of the era". Others write some of their postings with an invisible audience in mind, often adding "for the record" in their posting before they make a claim or argument. Shekhina is explicit about this consciousness: "Index's Polforum is used as the biggest and most widely read one. There

logic. His perspective of the campaign and the arguments he used on the forum were markedly lacking in moral claims, to the point of saying that he would not mind working on a campaign of Fidesz, the great rival party, because he finds the professional challenge enticing. The professional perspective and the technicised language of campaign communication he used were highly conducive to rational argumentation, but they failed to initiate a dialogue with those participants who tended to interpret politics in a symbolic, moral frame.

are more people reading it than posting to it. This is why it's worth it – I get this question many times, why do I enter debates with the mentally disturbed. It's terribly simple: because it's not them that I'm writing for, because I'll never convince them. But for those who read it, they need to have my..., they need to have other opinions too. Perhaps it'll make them think oops, the devil's not all that black as it's painted. And there are tons, far more reading it than posting. There are tons, and it's precisely to those who read it that I address the remarks called 'for the record'. There are many people who monitor [the forum], taking cues for orientation from it. Per 'the opinion of internet users', anywhere, on any forums, even other online discussion forums can rely on Index for what the internet users say.”

Political activism on the forum

The potential audiences and the sense of record-keeping can help generate an approach that treats forum participation as a venue of political activism. Activism in this context would not be limited to parties and organisations using the forum to spread their message; it is the grassroots activism of participant blocs developed along political cleavages that creates the activist mode of discussion. My right-wing informants talked about how, during campaign 2002, they felt they needed to coordinate their action and present concerted argumentation on the forum. For this purpose, they mobilised the network of friends they had established in previous years through the group of like-minded participants who had been getting together for face-to-face meetings on a more or less regular basis. These meetings, as Publius explained, were “nothing special; we got together at a restaurant, drank beer and dry red wine, had dinner, and talked there, usually not even about politics, more about history and literature. This is a – we can call it a friendly association that works on a basis of invitation, with a core circle of, say, 15-20 people, and then one can be admitted through recommendations. This association was expanded before the elections, this is an open secret, it can be read from the topikis on Index. It became expanded quite significantly before the elections.”

The members of the expanded association that now united a broad range of right-wing thinking set up a closed mailing list to coordinate their forum communications. According to its participants, the mailing list served a theoretical and a practical purpose. Its theoretical significance was, in Publius's words, "to make it clear on the mailing list what it is that we can stand by, and what it is that we cannot. What it is to which the group can lend its "virtual face" and to what it cannot. For it's clear that we are there individually, as DeLex or GFerro or me or Hermés or anyone else, we give ourselves, yet it matters what we [as a group] say. So it obviously affects our texts. This is a kind of theoretical coordination, about basic principles that must be observed." In this respect, the mailing list appears to function as a parallel public space (Herbst 1994) to which participants can withdraw to invent and circulate interpretations of their identities and needs (Fraser 1992).

On the practical side, the mailing list helps coordinate action in online discussions. Reasonable discussion can be inhibited by the lack of information, it can be blocked by flooding, off-topik threads, ad hominem attacks, or the ignoring of the topic. As Hermés explained, these blocks can be dissolved if participants join forces: "Flooding and off-topik [occur] when the debate partner has run out of arguments and tries to derail the topic with a barrage of messages irrelevant to the issue. That's when we call our friends to help us stay on-topik. There's nothing to respond to the ad hominem, because if you reply you too end up embroiled in it. That's when our friend comes and we carry on between each other. This way it's possible to maintain the interest of neutral and objective topik dwellers in the issue. Also, we divide the field for searching internet sources in support of our arguments. And we help keep the topic on top: if it has a catchy title, then the other side starts to refresh uninteresting topics to squeeze ours off the front page. A case in point was when we posted a warning about a demonstration to say that no one knew about it, it was probably a provocation, nobody should go. Now the other side tried to strangle this topik in every way, first by pushing it to

the back, then flooding. All we did was to have the same message (don't go) posted again and again, by as many of us as possible.”

The mailing lists – for the left-liberals of the forum have also had their closed list for like-minded participants – provide a filtered, select circle of people to communicate with. Closed lists offer privacy, and forum dwellers traditionally respect that privacy. In a memorable incident recounted by several informants, the mailing list of the left-liberal camp was hacked, and an extreme right-wing participant started shopping around the thousands of e-mail messages downloaded from the list. When GFerro was offered the e-mails, however, instead of reading them he called a left-liberal veteran from the hacked list to warn him about what happened. As Publius explained, the sense of decency and the gentlemanly conduct professed by moderate participants would not permit them to stoop so low as to read the private e-mails of forum opponents.

Closed mailing lists are private also in the sense of not having one's thoughts and words questioned immediately and constantly. Arguments do surface on mailing lists, and the hammering out of shared positions requires the give and take of reasons, but these are friendly discussions where the fundamental political self-positioning of list members can go unchallenged. The lack of public scrutiny can in fact be conducive to critical opinions about the members' own political blocs. The culture of forum discussions is generally not favourable to making concessions to the other side, but in a closed circle of like-minded allies it becomes easy to admit that one's preferred political parties or public figures make mistakes, blunders, or are at fault. Aniseed talked about a mailing list that had been set up years ago by veteran participants from both the left-liberal and right-wing camps. On that list, friendship overrules political affiliations, and it is the norm to admit the wrongness of the bad moves of one's party. To do otherwise, that is staunchly defending the indefensible, would equal

belittling the discussion partner – therefore she concedes the correctness of criticisms even if they are addressed to her employers.

The openness to critical opinions, the willingness to concede the points of the others, and the consensus these can create are important promises of deliberation. In the context of Polforum, however, they can emerge more easily under conditions of secrecy (closed mailing lists) than in public (forum topiks). List members do not need to fight for recognition, as the fact of their getting invited to join is already an expression of that. Consequently, they no longer need to use the same forceful and harsh tone that is a rational option when struggling for attention on the forum. Establishing a presence, getting one's message out to others, and repeatedly expressing outrage at what one perceives to be continued injustice in existing institutions are the essence of political activism. However, they are also potentially antithetical to deliberation (Young 2001). Activism is often aimed at highlighting injustices perpetuated in the status quo, and it does not necessarily include the mandate to listen to others' views and opinions. Therefore from a deliberative perspective it may seem impossible to engage with, for activist claims are unreasonable, 'extremist' even, and they get labelled as such. However, as Young argues, most political activists "aim to *communicate* specific ideas to a wide public" (p. 676), and they are willing to justify their claims and actions, and in this sense they display reasonability.

Deliberative dis-closures

From a deliberative perspective, the task on Polforum (like in other arenas of public discussion) is to establish which arguments and claims can be considered legitimate for democratic debate, and which fall into the category of the destructive. In forum discussions, the name-calling of 'fascist' and 'communist' often provides labels for unacceptable claims or participants, expressing frustration with positions that cannot be handled in deliberative exchanges. The labels are used so often, however, that they tend to lose their force or original

political meaning. As MrsNorris says, 'commie', 'bolshie', 'Nazi', and 'fascist' are used as "synonyms, almost as synonymous with 'idiot'. Say, it's widely known about me that I'm a Jew, and I'm quite used to being called a zionnazi or a judeobolshevik, whatever. Then sometimes I get bored with it and return the ad hominem, other times I just laugh." There are very few nicks on Polforum who communicate views that are extremist to the point of racist hate-mongering, and there are no true communists or people with extreme left ideologies. Nor are there communist or fascist parties in parliament, and the only populist right-wing small party whose agenda included covert antisemitism was voted out of parliament in 2002. The labels of 'fascist' and 'communist' are nonetheless widely used on the forum, as well as in everyday political talk elsewhere. They are shortcuts to expressing strong disagreement with political positions, but Hungarian history charges them with additional meaning.

The silence during the decades of soft dictatorship that was imposed on public discussions about the dual occupation of the country, first by Nazi Germany late in World War II, then the troops of the Soviet Union, the Holocaust, the Communist gulags and the universal dispossession through nationalisation, the retaliations for the 1956 revolution, made the processing of these traumas impossible. The guilt, shame, fear, and loathing in the victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of these events were repressed, public discussion of them was silenced, and they became taboos. Unofficial stories became repressed personal memories, or they lived on in private settings, passed on in family narratives. Repression – in a psychoanalytical sense of the word – occurred in public, but the repressed was bound to return, as some feared it would in the newly democratised countries of Eastern Europe (Žižek 1994), and as it perhaps did, briefly, in neighbouring Austria (Mendelssohn 2000). Lifting the ban of public discussion from some of the taboos, like the 1956 revolution, helped cope with the trauma associated with them. With other issues, and especially the Holocaust, the resurfacing only made it clear that meaningful public dialogue about them was nearly

impossible, even though the inability to communicate seemed to become the most neuralgic point of Hungarian culture as well as an implicit organising principle for political blocs (Vajda 2000).

The stories of real-life historical horrors are familiar part of everyday life, popping up in casual Hungarian conversations in all kinds of everyday settings. It is culturally acceptable to share snippets of autobiographical horror even with acquaintances of the more or less casual kind. In the absence of systematic research into this area, I can only rely on anecdotal evidence for such sharing of stories from my experience, but these anecdotes reveal social practices that appear to be pervasive. In spring 2006, I was riding on a train to a town in the south-west of Hungary. The woman sitting across from me in the train booth struck up a conversation, and after discussing her family she was beginning to make references to national politics. Her preferences were quite clear from the comments she made, but at some point I felt encouraged to ask her who she voted for. “Fidesz, only ever Fidesz”, she responded, and went on to add by way of an explanation, “My brother was executed in ’58”.

On another occasion, my neighbour was musing about the possible reasons of her 80-year-old mother’s neurosis. She told me that her father, a painter of artistic sensitivity, was taken for forced labour towards the end of World War II and never returned. Then as the Soviet troops ‘liberated’ Budapest from the German occupation, the soldiers of the Red Army raped her mother, along with two other women from the very house they all still lived in in 2001.

A few years later, in a different district in downtown Budapest, another neighbour was giving me the dirt on the caretaker of the building. The caretaker is a man who tolerates no disagreement in the house, his militaristic position accented by the story he shares freely with anyone about the time he served in the Hungarian army in WWII on the Russian front. After a

tirade against the caretaker, the neighbour said casually, “I’m sure he got his apartment after it was vacated by deported Jews”. He added with a shrug, “history is full of ugliness”.

The list of anecdotes could go on, but their value from the perspective of this research lies in the way they highlight the pervasiveness of private, personal memories attached directly to historical traumas, the presupposition in all conversation contexts of a shared historical background knowledge, and the explanatory power attributed to historical events for contemporary phenomena ranging from neurosis to political preferences.

Surfacing taboos

Polforum with its unique environment of semi-publicity provides fertile ground for the surfacing of repressed themes and taboo issues. “Jewsing” (*zsidózás*), that is the practice of bringing Jews into discussions in a derogatory way is present in both an open and a covert, ‘coded’ way on the forum. It can emerge in any discussion, precisely because antisemitism can be closely related to conspiracy theories that find the Jewish angle in every political event or theme (Koltai 2002). However, those topics that are successful in breeding quality discussions by being long-running and/or presenting many good arguments lack antisemitic sub-threads. Nonetheless, the frequency with which the forum throws up “Jewsing” is striking for readers who see the discussions for the first time. One of my informants, Illuminatus, is of Jewish-Hungarian origins but has lived in the United States for decades. He is a physician, he is also an active member of the Republican Party (he had his own radio talk show on his local community radio, and he had even been asked before to run for office, a request he declined because of the workload he gets from his practice). He is a veteran of online political discussions: he first joined a political Bulletin Board System in 1981, and from 1987 to 1994 he was leader of a popular BBS discussion in Washington, D.C. where on occasion senators and other public figures also joined in the discussion. To my question whether he found anything surprising about the forums on Index after his long experience with BBS

discussions, he said, “Not really. Roughly in BBS style, a self-selected group were debating the problems of society and the individual”. When he encountered antisemitism on Polforum, however, he was appalled: “I have posted this several times, how I have never thought about this issue up until I came across it on the forum.” Illuminatus reacted by opening a topik dedicated to the level-headed discussion of antisemitism, for him “logic is the most important thing, above all else”. He was given moderator rights over his own topik, and he made the rules of the discussion very clear from the start: “You may write anything about what the others wrote, you may write nothing about the others themselves.” The topik became one of the long-running, reasoned discussions where participants listed and debated their likes and dislikes about Jews, until a lot of its postings got lost in a technical glitch.

Illuminatus’s attempt at rational discussion about a neuralgic point of Hungarian public affairs was unique not only in its approach but also the exceptional control he enjoyed in controlling the discussion. In most other cases, however, reasoned discussion about antisemitism proves impossible on Polforum. For this reason, moderate participants tend to avoid these discussions. Publius, himself a historian by profession, believes that “in all political cultures there are political taboos that, alas, alas, cannot be discussed in a reasonable, sensible way. I do not give my opinion about the history of Hungarian Jews, their role, because it cannot be talked about in a meaningful, normal, decent way. Usually, if this comes up, I recommend some good literature about the issue. Or when some people get into this idiocy of Hungarian Nazi ideas, I quote from Szálasi’s book⁷² to make it obvious that this is an extremist, completely stone primitive, left-wing demagogue.” Percolator, who is more radical in his debate style, agrees: “I deeply dislike topik about racism and antisemitism, so I stay as far away from these as I can, because I must say I don’t fancy the argument repertoire of either side. And I see that here there’s absolutely no chance... The lines are completely

⁷² Szálasi was the leader of the Hungarian Nazi arrowcross movement. He seized power in 1944, he was executed in March 1946.

rigid on this matter, positions are deeply rigid, petrified, and here it is only pure loathing that flows. I don't understand why anyone contributes to these [topiks].”

I asked mrsnorris why she engaged in heated ad hominem exchanges with antisemites, a practice that had earned banishments for several of her nicks. “I don't want them to think this is 80 years ago, like when a Jew dares not talk back”, was her response. “I told them as much, so they know why they were getting it: they're 60 years late.” Her postings rarely engage with daily political events, but she joins in whenever a participant makes antisemitic remarks. This watchdog trait of her participation marks her out for antisemites. Among my informants, there was only one nick who could be classified as antisemitic based on his postings. Monkfish opted for talking to me via e-mail, and he was careful not to reveal his name, job, or any socio-demographic information about himself. He was also reluctant to answer my questions, dismissing most of them as “a kind of ‘grilling in an underpass’ (which usually ends in action of the ‘Congratulations, You won’ kind...). Such things make me shiver”. He was, however, happy to make the points he felt mattered most about his forum experiences: the alleged readership he had among journalists and politicians, and his struggles with the “Jewish lobby” on the forum. Monkfish seems to prefer the coded variety of antisemitic talk, like he did when describing Central European University to me as a “sort of Trojan horse... (at least its creators/founders/funders intended/intend it as such)”. As for the “Jewish lobby” on Index, he understands this to be “sharing tasks on a continual, planned basis. Their goal is to tackle phenomena that are ‘embarrassing, unpleasant, negative, can be linked’. Of these there are a good many, for it is no big secret that numerous political, cultural, etc. themes have been ‘about them’ recently. Cf. even the first Hungarian nobel prize for literature.⁷³ Well, this is what they're trying to defend/make bagatelle/explain/‘sell’ etc.

And one can observe that if something or somebody goes against this, he will immediately

⁷³ The first Hungarian winner of the literary Nobel prize was Imre Kertész in 2002. Kertész is a Holocaust survivor whose relationship to Hungary is ambivalent.

attract sizzling attacks...” Monkfish also named some members of the “lobby” with both nick and IRL name and profession, including mrsnorris. He claimed essentially that a small group of participants use multiple nicks to patrol the forum and jump in whenever Jews are brought into the arguments. His claim of such tactical debating was echoed by how Rexaminer explained the strategies of antisemites on the forum: “It doesn’t involve a lot of people, but the strategy is to ‘press on’ by constantly pushing discussion over to the Jewish issue, under multiple nicks, crapping into each topik. They don’t respond to any kind of reasoning, they don’t engage in substantive debate, but they occupy topik and show they’re very organised.”

There are thus two groups of net warriors on Polforum, and for their participation hunting is an essential ingredient. One set of nicks hunts for antisemitic claims, the other set seeks opportunities for highlighting the Jewish angle in whatever political event is discussed. If net warriors manage to take over a discussion, they extinguish any hope of reasonable discussion, for the interpretive frame of ‘Nazis versus Jews’ allows little room for reasoned argumentation. Nor is the purpose of these battles proper argumentation; these fights are much closer to ritualistic enactments of condemnation. The principles of the antisemite and the principles of the Jew are irreconcilable, and as Wittgenstein put it, “Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic” (Wittgenstein 1969-1975) (#611). This is what happens between the two groups of hunters on Polforum: their clashes, which are loaded with fierce ad hominem remarks, are intended by each side to brand the other as inadmissible in democratic politics. Paradoxically, however, the outcome of these clashes is a jointly produced, mutually verified importance attached to this perspective on all political issues. In a sense, both groups sustain successful political activism. They manage to keep their perspective on the discussion agenda, highlighting unresolved issues that refuse to go away. The more accessible field of the forum

allows them to do so with greater efficiency than other spheres of public communication would.

The antisemitism versus antifascism fights are also frequently supplemented by debates about the communist era, making the historical experience of dictatorships a recurring reference point in contemporary discussions. In the absence of a broad national consensus about the interpretations of historical traumas, and, as I argue in Chapter 3, no deliberative closure to enable moving on, these experiences continue to haunt the Hungarian public. ‘Democratic censorship’ (Buchstein 1997; Sunstein 2001) would not be able to offer a solution either, because an enforced public silence does not erase neuroses that can survive in private social settings. If the ‘return of the repressed’, as the research into Polforum also suggests, is inevitable, then it may be helpful to study the strategies, practices, and techniques participants use for coping with it. After all, the forum as a whole continues to be a robust, active, long-running site of voluntary engagement in political discussion, despite the recurring phenomena of views and preferences that are undesirable for a democratic public.

“I hate the Hungarian people so”

Arguably, it was the accessibility of the forum that helped a lone overseas activist raise a taboo issue and stir up the online public during the period of my research. The new character, dr. Remus entered the forum in late 2002, writing from New York where he had been living since he emigrated from communist Hungary in the early 1980s. He opened a new chapter in the already colourful history of political communications on Polforum by pursuing a single-minded agenda of letting Hungary know about the hatred he felt for Hungarians. His participation began as a response to a topik opened about the e-mails that he had been sending to public figures, mainly columnists of different newspapers but also members of American-Hungarian groups. In the e-mails, dr. Remus simultaneously asserted his hatred and justified it by identifying himself as a Jew, declaring in one that “I have to plead guilty, there’s

no way I'd make peace with those who were the murderers, butchers of my people. (...) I bravely say it aloud – because I'm not a cowardly, crap Jew who bows his head low, I've got blood in my dick – that I hate the Hungarian people so, only a poet could find the right words for it”, or in another, “I hate this goddamn people not only for the Holocaust, but also for the moral abyss that rules in this shitty little country, doesn't matter if we look at the Commie or the Nazi side”. In another e-mail addressed to an infamous right-wing columnist he warned the man, who is also a US citizen, to “Forget your American citizenship once and for all! If you dare utter it once more through that dirty, dung-smelling, Hungarian mouth of yours, I as the spokesman of the World Federation of Hungarian Jews will make sure you're stripped of this citizenship! (...) We have the proper means and connections too.” He also made repeated claims about his political influence in Washington that allegedly enabled him to prevent a meeting between President Bush and Hungary's Conservative prime minister.

As the first e-mails made their way to Polforum in the topik opened about them, participants initially reacted with utter disbelief. Since the topik was opened by an extreme right-winger, most participants initially dismissed the e-mails as forgery, part of the topik opener's plot to provoke controversy and malign Jews. Even after dr. Remus appeared in the topik, several participants refused to believe his authenticity. Doubt was reasonable because the e-mails attributed to him were written as private correspondence, hence it was unclear how they made their way to the topik opener's mailbox, but even more significantly, his views and the tone in which he expressed them were simply without precedent in public communication. Eventually, because dr. Remus used his own name as a nick and was duly

given 'ident' status by the moderators, people accepted that he was not a hoax or a provocation from the extreme right. The use of his own name earned him some meticulously polite treatment formally, but otherwise the ensuing participant reactions featured all of the regular elements with which forum dwellers treat inexcusable views: dr. Remus was publicly condemned, many postings declared a refusal to engage with his contributions, and he was branded a raving lunatic. The rhetorical strategies of flaming, joking, ostracism, and education of the newcomer have also been identified as community affirming strategies on Usenet newsgroups (Phillips 1996). They are among the available resources for defending the boundaries of the online group, and Polforum participants made use of them in their postings.

At the same time, a multi-channel process of identification was launched in an attempt to find out about the background of the man, thereby also contextualising his views. As Rexaminer summed up the issue programmatically, "Who the f@ck is this Remus to make him so important?" The issue of who dr. Remus was, and to what extent he could be considered a public figure, was important for contextualising any evaluation of his claims. Forum dwellers adhere to the maxim that public figures are to be judged differently from private individuals, as they inevitably also represent whatever organisation they work for, and can thus be held accountable in a broader sense. In this case, Remus's public status was supported by his spokespersonship at the World Federation of Hungarian Jews, and the journalism work he had done for a Hungarian tabloid newspaper. These also opened up angles through which his identity could be probed, for participants – with the exception of the known antisemites – were reluctant to accept that his views could stand for those of any group.

The identity checking process started with questions that were addressed directly to dr. Remus in the topik. A participant asked someone who had known Remus in his law student years in Budapest to join him as he went online to probe into Remus's recollections of his professors and courses. Shekhina quizzed him about Judaism, quoting a famous

Hebrew prayer and demanding dr. Remus to name its source to prove he had the right to speak in the name of Jews. Independent lines of inquiry were pursued relying on the aggregate data resources provided by the internet. REMUS, like the majority of internet users, left an online trail through his different affiliations and activities, and participants were hoarding the bits of information to the topik. The e-mail account he provided was checked on AOL; a message sent to a Yahoo mailing list from REMUS's alleged e-mail account by a woman who claimed to have no knowledge of him was copy-pasted to the topik; a participant found Remus's name, New York address, and phone number in AOL's public database; another search of the AOL database threw up a "Gay Ass Remus" with a NY address; a Yahoo search resulted in an article published in *The Budapest Sun* about Remus, describing how the "51-year-old retired limousine driver" gave back a \$600 claim to help New York City after 9/11. While the rumour mills went into overdrive, dr. REMUS got himself banned for obscenity. In his absence, participants stopped discussing him, citing courtesy to a person who could not defend himself. Then REMUS's nick was restored, and he continued to shout obscenities, challenge and taunt all lowly Hungarian participants with boastful postings about his summa cum laude degree in law, his wealth, language proficiency, sexual prowess, model family life, and so on.

The identification anomalies and REMUS's own bizarre postings (including his refusal to believe Shekhina was a Jewess, which prompted him to taunt her, "What's this Yom Kippur, explain it to me? Must be a card game, played by [right-wing columnists], isn't it?") made some of the discussion threads in the topik truly hilarious. Participants quickly caught on the hilarity, and they started snowballing ideas that made self-referential parodies of the topik in the spirit of absurd theatre, telenovelas, Rejtő novels, and Stalinist paranoias as portrayed in a cult Hungarian comic movie. The results of the searching and probing into REMUS's background made participants conclude that he was not a

particularly notable, powerful, or otherwise distinguished person. Yet the discussion went on for a long time even after he was consensually branded a ‘nobody’; in fact Remus was making waves all across the Hungarian internet, on other discussion forums as well as Usenet. His communications appeared to have touched a nerve that continued to draw in others in a sort of repulsed fascination. A predictable thread of hard-core Jewsing also unfolded around him, as antisemites saw Remus’s declared views as open justification for their own hatred. Equally predictably, the Jewsing was countered by flak from participants like mrsnorris who has a history of ad hominem clashes with the topik opener. On the other hand, the topik also produced some beautiful reflections on the meanings of Jewish-Hungarian identities, posted as personal testimony.

Parallel to the discussions that unfolded in the public of the forum, participants were also beginning private conversations with dr. Remus. Shekhina told me that Remus contacted her in an e-mail, and when her response was not to his liking, they started “a decent feuding in private”. “I’m not really sure why I keep taunting him,” said Shekhina, “the guy simply irritates me, that there’re people like him.” Her private attempts at persuasion were intended to make Remus see that his extreme position made him no better than the rabid antisemites he was challenging: “That’s what I keep explaining to this wacko, that he with his hatred of Hungarians is doing precisely the same as the antisemites... he’ll get it slowly, I hope”. While Shekhina’s efforts seemed to make no difference to Remus’s postings, in private he was beginning to concede that she had a point, and promptly announced himself to be in love with her.

When I met dr. Remus in Budapest, he was gallant, polite, and quick to declare me a Jewess three minutes into our conversation in a downtown cake shop. He felt that the mission of his activism failed, because “in the 3,000 postings, no one asked why I hate Hungarians”. He also expressed some regret about his aggressive behaviour online, but he explained that he

had had a stroke a year before and the drugs he had been on since affected his conduct. He was also evidently proud of his political connections, listing the names of Hungarian public figures he had met and claiming that he inspired the introduction of the Holocaust memorial day in Hungarian schools after he raised the issue with the then-minister of education (he was referring to the minister by his Christian name). I have no reason to doubt that the meetings between him and Hungarian politicians visiting New York really took place, and despite the consensus built on the forum about his unimportance, other forum participants seemed to cautiously accept that REMUS indeed had access to decision-making powers in the US.

At the height of Remus's run on Polforum, I witnessed an exchange at a PFT that confirmed this. Although right-wingers as a rule do not attend PFTs, on this occasion in winter 2002 a moderate rightie participant, NOISY dropped by. His visit was brief and to the point: he wanted to consult Shekhina about damage control in the wake of Remus's possible anti-Hungarian lobbying. Both of them gave at least some credit to REMUS's having access to the US government, on the strength of press secretary Ari Fleischer's family roots going back to the Jewish-Hungarian community in a Transylvanian town. They felt that Hungary shouldn't be maligned by REMUS's feeding negative views about the Conservative government to the US administration through the press secretary, and Shekhina agreed that something should be done to resolve the situation. NOISY then left without hanging around any longer than was necessary once the alliance for the sake of national interest was sealed. I do not know whether anything, and if so what, emerged from this agreement, for Shekhina was already dedicated to the task of "taming" REMUS. Nevertheless, this episode again shows that in the murky public arena of the forum, participants are on occasion allowed to feel they have found openings of access to the sphere of political decision-making, and they relish these opportunities even if on the whole and officially they remain highly sceptical about the impact Polforum may have on the public sphere.

The triumph of the IRL

One element in the saga of accommodating dr. Remus on Polforum is particularly revealing about the politics of the forum. The need to acquire as much background, IRL information about the nick as possible in order to be able to contextualise and thereby evaluate his claims shows a strong reliance on offline dimensions in interpreting online ideas. I do not intend to use online and offline as directly opposed terms here, for they are politically inseparable, and outcomes are produced through the interaction of the two. But participants have a strong awareness of the distinction, and they rely on both spheres in forming their position about nicks and, by implication, the ideas and views communicated through the nicks. In doing so, they confirm the salience of the boundary between the online and the offline in everyday life, which is consistent with recent research findings from across Europe concluding that the offline, or face-to-face, is still seen as “the precondition for effective political action” (Silverstone 2005) (p.16).

It is worth noting the relative ease with which participants ran an IRL check on Remus, even though the man is based in New York. He was of course actively seeking out new acquaintances, welcoming the opportunity to meet people face to face when he visited Budapest. But even before that, participants had no difficulties finding people in their combined personal networks who were acquainted with the man and could supply background information on him. This suggests both the importance of personal information networks and the smallness of the pool of citizens who share an interest in online political discussion. These in turn strengthen the primacy of the face to face. Forum participants are driven by an urge to assign a ‘face’ to their discussion partners, preferring to tie online thoughts to individuals they have met or someone they know has met. The efforts to identify discussion partners are prime means of the authentication of thoughts and ideas expressed online. The IRL background of nicks provides the tools for “authentication authority” (Dolezel 1980), that is the ability to

establish and verify the ‘facts’ of the textual world of the forum. Identification is also understood to be a means by which a nick can be encouraged to take responsibility for its postings. Forum participants try to insist that people stay committed to their claims by anchoring nicks to firm and steady identities, thereby committing one another to avoid “risk-free anonymity” and “idle curiosity” that endanger the public sphere (Dreyfus 2004).

Instead of the fluid, decentralised, flexible, mobile identities that earlier research described as characteristic of people online (Poster 1995a; Turkle 1995), the efforts of Polforum participants to identify their discussion partners are aimed precisely at limiting identity play and ambivalence. The success of these efforts also has implications for the deliberative potential of the forum. Instead of the bracketing of status as required by ideal deliberation, status – at least in the sense of a fairly accurate intellectual profile, accompanied by implied or explicit socio-demographic markers – is the first entity participants want to establish about one another. From their perspective, however, identification and profiling do not undermine discussions, rather they are guarantees of the quality of the conversations. Core participants do not mind the resurfacing of status differences; on the contrary, they see intellectual achievement as a welcome measure for filtering nicks. The elitism of this position, however, is complemented by a highly democratised understanding of the range of areas acceptable for achievement. Broadly speaking, any area is acceptable as the grounds for excellence, as long as a participant has significant achievements in it. The filtering is thus based on merit, but its procedures were technologically constrained at the time of my research.

A clubbable crowd

Prominent participants in 2002 were discussing with increasing relish the technological solution to the issues of quality on Polforum. Their desire was to supplement the regular forum with an “ident” one that anyone could read but only those who had

identified themselves could post on. Anjun was very clear on how such a forum would serve quality: “There are too many contributors. Momma, there’s over 1.250 million postings on the forum, it’s beginning to lose its... Well now, how shall I put it, we want to do this club-like something where we grant admission only to the nicks who know one another, and obviously it’ll crystallise around the core group, I mean we’ll squeeze out all these provocateurs, nazis, arch communists, we simply won’t let them in. And there we’ll be able to debate. For I know – it’s not just me, a lot of us fossiles know it – there’s a very serious intellectual capacity behind it. And prominent names... you know what I mean.”

Participation policies aimed at preventing disruptions and ensuring the quality of discussions in American online communities have included identity verification and banishment for disruptive participants (Herring et al. 2002). When the club forum system was eventually introduced to Politika forum in 2004, the main slogan of the club forums summed up their mission in the same way: “one nick – one man – one shot”. Another club forum slogan declares “Club forum where Polforum participants discuss the situation of the economy on a strictly professional basis”. Topiks like the Monetary Council’s Meeting that were already functioning like closed clubs fitted into the club system easily, as did other long-running topiks dedicated to fun and relaxation. By the time the club forums materialised, I was no longer involved so deeply with Polforum, but it seemed to have a slow start, and it still appears not to have become the thriving space of quality discussion as intended.

Participants seemed to continue to prefer the old battlefield of Polforum which continued to exist under the traditional conditions, except that it was renamed into *PoliDili* (PoliBarmy), and it was redefined as “Real PoliBarmy, with picturesque mines and superb shell-fire – only for the determined!”. Before the new system was introduced, Polforum carried the slogan of “Online Hyde Park Corner! You may write your opinion even about the government here! And more!” The shift in how the essence of the forum is articulated in the

slogans is marked: the emphasis on freedom of expression was changed into emphases on the conditions, style, and, by implication, outcome of discussions.

The club forums are intended to be a better approximation of a deliberative forum. The closed membership system serves the filtering of participants in a way that excludes extreme views that can generate political domination and impose partisan interests on any topic through the use of multiple nicks. The sense of responsibility for claims made in the discussions is created by the dual strategy of identifying participants with a single nick and by threatening retaliation (eternal banishment) for those who ignore the norms of discussion. Theoretically then the base instincts of venting strong emotions stirred by politics are tamed, and reasoned enlightenment guides the debates. Raw emotions, ad hominem exchanges, name-calling, and hurtful labelling are relegated to the open arena of the ‘barmy’ forum, while the ‘superego’ of participants is invited to join the clubs. The deliberative process is thus understood to be contingent on exclusion, a hierarchisation of discussion where the top tier of participants is formed on the principle of meritocracy. This would be a rather Schumpeterian conclusion to the Polforum experience, and one that would be consistent with the veteran participants’ quite elitist perceptions of the excellence of their group. Such a conclusion would also suggest that the transformative effects of political participation on the forum actually point towards less democratic openness. These would be bad news for deliberative democracy in Hungary, were it not for the fact that, compared to the ‘barmy’ open arena, the club forums are not proving successful.

Postscript

In light of the community effort and waiting that went into devising the club forums, it remains an especially intriguing question why participants failed to seize their opportunity for quality deliberation. In a conversation over lunch in summer 2006, I asked St_Keith what he thought about the reasons for this apparent anomaly. He shrugged and said he didn’t know,

and no one he had discussed this question with could come up with a definitive answer. He did have a theory, however. He said, “When they were planning the club forums, they were driven by a nostalgic dream of what the forum was like in the beginning, when it was really like a *törzsasztal* in a pub, everyone knowing everyone else. By now, it has grown too big.” I thought for a moment that he saw the problem in the impossibility of reproducing a small, close-knit community in a large, heterogeneous society the Index forums have grown into. But it turned out that he was referring to the growth Polforum has achieved in public recognition and audience, and he thought it was becoming too public a forum for comfort. “It doesn’t take long, three weeks or four maybe, to track down any nick from the forum. For a long time now, no one has come here to persuade others, we know that can’t be done. But the forum was great for picking up insider tips, gossip, or leaked bits of information. That’s harder to do now, with so many people watching, people who leak information can be found out.” Essentially, St_Keith sees the forum as endangered by its popularity, with the ensuing growth in audiences pushing forum discussions towards greater publicity from the semi-public character that had made it a protected sphere for political talk. The club forums with their select group of participant nicks only make the identification easier, therefore they are avoided. It remains to be seen whether he is right in his assessment, and whether forum dwellers can come up with another solution for realising both the ideals of deliberative discussion and the secrecy so important for stressing their difference from the ‘common world’ of political life.

Conclusion

The dissertation started out from the premise that instead of highlighting the shortcomings of political participation in the ‘third-wave’ democracy Hungary, it is more helpful to explore existing practices of participation to better understand the reasons for the success or failure of participatory practices. The main research question was thus: Why is Politika forum such a long-running, robust institution? What is it that makes the online forum a prominent site of discussion among diverse and disagreeing elements of the Hungarian polity? The main question was complemented by seeking answers to a set of more specific questions on who participate in the online discussions, what standards and practices they rely on to manage conflict and disagreement, and what role the forum plays in the Hungarian public sphere.

My findings show that the success of the forum is supported by the embeddedness of discussion in everyday Hungarian political practices. As previous research shows, Hungarians have broad and politicised networks in which political discussion occurs with both like-minded individuals and people of different political convictions. Participants on the discussion forum can thus have a wealth of prior experience and practice to build on in making sense of discussion in the new sphere afforded to conversation by the internet. The online discussion forum offers a semi-public, protected arena where the intimacy of ‘safe’ social settings like the home or one’s regular haunt (coffeehouse, pub) can be reproduced. The social setting of the forum is gradually pushed towards publicity, partly through the emergence of moral disagreement and the political debates inspired by this, and partly through the increasingly large audience of readers attracted to the forum. The semi-public nature of the forum also favours the extension of discussion to all areas of life, including issues that are absent from traditional arenas of the public sphere. Online discussions are

conducive to the surfacing of social and political taboos. The persistence of repressed historical memories among the taboo issues raised on the forum suggests that the absence of a shared understanding of traumas that is produced in a process of public deliberation continues to prevent 'moving on' for Hungarian democracy.

Second, the success of Politika forum can also be attributed to the multiple opportunities the forum offers for political participation. For long-term participants, the forum incorporates the potential of all four political uses of the World Wide Web (Stromer-Galley forthcoming). Like a 'one-stop shop' of participation, the forum can serve information dissemination, discussion, mobilisation, and activism. Some of these uses are visible from a reading of the postings, while others are accessible only by in-depth involvement that moves beyond the 'public' surface of what is posted online. The different forms of political engagement, however, can produce conflicting outcomes. Activism and reasoned discussion can be especially difficult to reconcile, and when such conflicts occur, one way participants handle them is through appeals to principles of deliberation.

Deliberative principles in the course of everyday political discussion become the practical means of maintaining conversation, and by implication a political community on the forum. The appeals to the principles of deliberation tend to assume a shared understanding of the culture of Politika forum, and it is often through this context, rather than as abstract ideals, that they can be made sense of. Another key to maintaining the standards of good discussion is the filtering of ideas and participants through the identification of the online persona in its IRL context so that participants could be encouraged to take responsibility for their claims. The clearest manifestation of the filtering and identification procedures are the discussion clubs that were set up in an attempt to manage the growth of the forum. Clubs are both a time-honoured institution of associational life and a means of screening the circle of possible discussion partners. In a sense they de-democratise participation, driving the forum towards

privacy in the shape of enclosed arenas of conversation. The club forums were introduced after the research period had ended, therefore I do not have a firm answer to the intriguing question of why they seem to have failed in their mission. This could be a question for further research.

Finally, I found the relationship between the forum and the Hungarian public sphere to be ambivalent. The forum reconfigures the elements of Hungarian politics in novel constellations in the context created by its online culture, and as a result it is simultaneously recognised to be an important site of engagement for politically active citizens and dismissed as irrelevant, chaotic, and unreliable ‘pub politicking’. Even though Polforum has become a sphere where the distance between political decision makers, the media, and ‘lay’ citizens can be bridged, the mixing and mingling on the forum generally remains semi-secret and informal.

The participants on the forum are not representative of the whole Hungarian population, they are better educated and in many cases wealthier than the average. Nonetheless, their conversations produce a 24/7 public broadcast of the salon discussions of the ‘chattering classes’ that cover all political issues and events from multiple angles, with the added authenticity granted by the voluntary nature of these associations. I believe therefore that the forum is an important public arena of politics, also for the collective intelligence it can produce in the on-going process of making sense of Hungarian democracy.

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