Online Media Participation and the Transformation of the Public Sphere: Moving Beyond the Fragmentation Debate

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1. Introduction

A lasting charge has it that online media facilitate a fragmentation of the public sphere that could lead to balkanization of public debate, and consequently political polarization. This concern has been a catalyst for scholarly debate among media and internet researchers, also mobilizing those who point to novel democratic values of online communication. The one-way top-down form of established mass media, they argue, fails to activate the public and provide real public debate. In contrast, on the internet, more, and more different voices can be heard in a potentially global conversation between active participants. As the internet has become ubiquitous, this key issue concerning the impact of mediated online participation for the structure of the public sphere still remains disputed.

Recent contributions have tended to concentrate on either empirical or conceptual aspects. To move our understanding forward, internet research as a critical practice needs to consider both a theoretical and an empirical shortcoming. Attempting to tackle these shortcomings, this paper is meant as a step on the way beyond the fragmentation debate.

I start by describing what is at stake with the fragmentation of the public sphere. Next, I review recent contributions to research on online media participation's effect on the structure of the public sphere, focusing on blogs and the blogosphere. I identify the pertinent challenges as, first, a need to move beyond Anglo-American contexts and general speculative diagnoses, and, second, a need to rethink the basis in normative public sphere theory. Research tends to stick with a too restricted concept of politically relevant communication. The consequence is a limited understanding of the workings and transformation of the public sphere. What we ought to have is a notion of politically relevant communication that enables us to grasp a larger portion of the multitude of communicative practices online. On this basis, I outline the methodological design of a study starting in a small non-English language area: a mapping of the blogosphere as seen from Norway.

2. The mediated public sphere and the issue of fragmentation

A public is a body made up of members of a democratic polity. Acting collectively, they control the rule of their society. When the public communicates about the collective control of societal rule, they construct a public sphere. This sphere plays a key role in contemporary democratic theory. In complex modern societies, the

communication in the public sphere is to a substantial extent dependent on mediation. A mediated public sphere can, however, not let everyone talk to all. Using the USA as an example, Benjamin I. Page somewhat satirically commented in 1992: "If each citizen insisted […] upon a rather modest two minutes of speaking time, the discussion would take five hundred million minutes: that is, 347,222 days, or 950 years. Extreme boredom and impatience would result" (Page 1992, 4). Therefore, any large society must decentralize deliberation or accept a division of labour. The first means carrying out dialogue in a multitude of forums. The second solution means only a fraction of citizens addresses the wider public.

Current deliberative democratic theory takes this into account. As a normative ideal, the public sphere is a "warning system with sensors" spread throughout society independent from the state apparatus (Habermas [1992] 1996: 359). Political decisions must be steered by communication flows in the public sphere. These flows should start at the periphery of society and "pass through the sluices of democratic procedures at the entrance to the parliamentary complex" (Habermas [1992] 1996: 356). Based on points of reference such as functional specifications, thematic foci, and policy fields the public sphere is differentiated into for example feminist, literary, or artistic publics. An organized form of civil society is essential for this model. Made up of non-governmental and non-economic associations, movements, and organisations, it should both prevent the public sphere from being subverted by power and make sure social problems get listened to. The mediated public sphere should assist the institutions of civil society by transmitting concerns from the periphery of society, generating public debate, and mounting pressure for the political system at the core to respond.

These tasks, then, include both dissemination of information and facilitation of dialogue. The challenge is to have a public sphere structured to attain a balance and between these functions: a healthy portion of dialogue in diverse arenas that feed into each other through dissemination to all. This structural balance is, however, hard to find. Electronic mass media have always been criticized for failing the function of facilitating dialogue, and for excluding certain voices from their dissemination (e.g. Brecht in Silberman 2000 on radio, Hall 1992 on tv). Others have warned against a division into secluded forums (e.g. Gitlin 1998), or sought to rehabilitate dissemination (Peters 1999). The discussion of whether or not online media contribute to a fragmentation of the public sphere needs to be understood on this background.

In *Republic.com 2.0*, Cass R. Sunstein (2007, also 2008) refers to Nicholas Negroponte's vision of a near future where everyone has a "DailyMe" – a completely personalized composition of information sources and all kinds of cultural content. Sunstein labels this prophecy "not nearly ambitious enough" (2007, 4). In exploring what is required from a well-functioning public sphere, he points to two key features. First, people must be exposed to expressions, opinions, and perspectives they would not have chosen in advance; and, second, "many or most citizens should have a range of common experiences" (Sunstein 2007, 5-6). Sunstein's argument rests on evidence that groups of like-minded are inclined to end up in an extreme version of their view after discussing among themselves. Thus, dissenting voices are crucial for a healthy public sphere (see Sunstein 2003). And, he asserts, though it clearly has its merits, internet communication, the newfound ease of filtering of unwanted information often contributes to a segmentation of the public sphere, with dangerous balkanization, erosion of social life and extremism as the potential outcome. Accordingly, we need a regulatory system that maintains the functions of "general interest intermediaries" – like the large newspapers and the nationwide broadcasters – also in the digital era. In sum, Sunstein warns against giving undue weight to dialogue in the cost of society-wide dissemination.

Yochai Benkler has a markedly more positive view of the impact of internet-based communication on the workings of the public sphere. In *The Wealth of Networks* (2006) he takes stock with pessimists like Sunstein, and offers a thorough discussion of how different web-based applications contribute to changing democratic rule by facilitating a networked public sphere. According to his argument, individuals do not use their ability to control the flow of information to isolate themselves in homogenous groups. Benkler assesses several studies of online behaviour, and presents analyses of how diverse internet services are utilized, often in combination, with a vitalizing outcome.

Granted, he continues, diverse mechanisms for filtering, accreditation, and synthesis do rely on "clustering of communities of interest and association and highlighting of certain sites" (2006, 271). Still, the same mechanisms provide "tremendous redundancy of paths for expression and accreditation" (2006, 271). Benkler's conclusion is almost celebratory: "the network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the

internet democratizes" (2006, 272). This is, then, a hailing of the dialogical potential of online media – and its ability to counterbalance the dominance of dissemination.

The main problem for Sunstein and Benkler – as for the fragmentation debate in general – is the limited empirical evidence. This is a weakness both Sunstein and Benkler are well aware of. It might also help explain the diverging diagnoses they make based on similar theoretical positions. Naturally, relatively few studies exist of these new phenomena. Nevertheless, a first step to tackle the shortcomings of the fragmentation debate is to review recent contributions to research on online media and the structure of the public sphere.

3. Online media and the structure of the public sphere

It makes little sense to try to assess the general impact of online media on the public sphere. "Online media" is of course a hopelessly large and amorphous category. Empirical research, therefore, is forced to concentrate on some kinds of online media. Some choose forms that represent characteristics far removed from traditional offline mass media – namely the potential for two-way many-to-many communication. One such form is the message board or discussion forum. Studies of discussion forums and the public sphere tend to focus on how deliberative the discussion are (e.g. Albrecht 2006; Graham and Witschge 2003; Zhou et al. 2008) or how other styles of communication can matter (e.g. Black 2008). Others have studied the design of forums looking for features that may heighten their performance (e.g. Wright and Street 2007). Such contributions concern the form or content of communication in the public sphere, but they do not tackle issues of how the structure of the public sphere is changed by online media. Another form of online media has become the centrepiece for research that does – namely the blog.

A blog is often defined as a frequently updated, mainly text-based website consisting of chronologically dated entries in reverse order. To define the blog as a genre distinct from others found online, we need to add that it is "an author-driven, asynchronous and informal genre of computer-mediated communication that uses various modalities and entails some interactivity" (Lomborg 2009, 3). Such a broad definition provides the necessary room for the wealth of diverse sub-genres, and at the same time allows for the genre to remain dynamic. Based on this definition, specific blogs can be positioned along a continuum in relation to three dimensions (Lomborg 2009, 6):

(a) Content axis: Internal – topical: does it deal with personal themes, experiences and emotions, or primarily topics of general interest?

(b) Directional axis: Monological – dialogical: is it primarily used for dissemination to an audience, or highly conversational and densely networked?

(c) Style axis: Intimate – objective: is it confessional and personal or rather objective in tone?

Blogs and related tools mean it is easy for individuals to make information about a pressing issue publicly available. Blogs also stand out from traditional mass media with key features like hyperlinks, diverse feedback mechanisms, easily accessible archived material, and systems for signalling endorsement. From its infancy around the turn of the millennium, the blog grew to become "the most notorious among newcomers shaking up our culture, society, and politics" (Perlmutter 2008, xiii). By 2009, the blog has become a mainstream genre of computer-mediated communication. This has created a wealth of works discussing different dimensions of blogs – such as blogs as online communities or blogging as performativity or self-narration. The development has also led to a body of work relevant for an assessment of online media's impingement on the structure of the public sphere.

These studies are interested in "the overall community of blogs and bloggers, which is interlinked by a large number of cross-references between individual blog entries" – i.e. the blogosphere (Bruns and Jacobs 2006, 5). If we focus on the structure of the blogosphere as part of a public sphere, the question is where the borders are for that "community", how communal it is, and how its links are distributed and reciprocated. Referring to the second definitory axis mentioned above, we are interested in to what extent blogs are monological or dialogical, and how different networks of blogs relate to each other.

This is a prime point of interest for both Benkler and Sunstein. The blogosphere is a key part of Benkler's examples, contributing to his positive conclusion. And bloggers, even Sunstein admits, surely have had some success in breaking through to large publics with previously ignored insight, and by occasionally providing indispensable control of mainstream media. But although the blogosphere increases the range of available information and perspectives, especially linking practices show

less encouraging trends, he continues. Links are most commonly provided to like-minded with little quality control. "For many people, blunders, confusion, and extremism are highly likely, not in spite of the blogosphere but because of it" (Sunstein 2007, 150).

Stephen D. Cooper (2006) also assesses the impact of blogging on the public sphere. He argues that the blogosphere has improved both its quantity and quality: "We can simply note that the blogosphere would seem to be a near-perfect instantiation of the ideal discourse" (Cooper 2006, 303). This astonishingly optimistic diagnosis is, however, reached without any explicit, systematic empirical analyses. Thus, it does not bring us any further beyond the fragmentation debate.

Other contributions start from an interest in specific political situations, chiefly US national politics or elections. Two recent examples are David D. Perlmutter's *Blogwars* (2008) and Aaron Barlow's *Blogging America* (2008), subtitled *The New Public Sphere*. Both undertake thorough analyses of a range of blogs, yielding valuable insight into the workings of the blogosphere as well as its relations to the journalistic mass media. However, neither of them approaches the issue from a public sphere theory perspective, nor do they focus on structural questions. That is, they do neither discuss the monological or dialogical character of the blogs, nor how different blog networks interrelate.

Such studies are fewer and farther between. Hargittai et al (2008) offer one sound example. Testing the fragmenting potential of online media, they undertake an empirical analysis of linking practices of a set of widely read liberal and republican blogs from the USA. Their findings confirm the hypothesis that blogs are more likely to link to blogs that match their ideological persuasion (see also Garrett 2009). Matthew Hindman's impressive book *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2009) is another recent contribution. As the title signals, Hindman looks not only at blogs, but at the use of diverse internet tools, including search engines. Hindman argues that the internet looks very much like the offline media world: audiences are no less concentrated; it is still extremely hard to get heard for those who do not belong to a small elite group; and highly educated white males write the handful of blogs that actually do get broad attention.

All of the above works are based on US studies (further examples can be found e.g. in Tremayne (ed.) 2007; Kenix 2009). The US dominance is hardly surprising, and much in line with the state of media and communication studies in general (e.g.

Thussu 2009). It does, however, have obvious consequences for the generalizability of the findings.

Consider again Sunstein's and Benkler's pessimistic and optimistic diagnoses. Both write from the USA. Thus, traditions for regulatory control, the existing media policy regime, and the mediated public sphere itself are all quite distinct. When Sunstein calls for stricter regulations to secure "general interest intermediaries" in the digital era, it is with the liberal American level of impingement as a point of reference. Similarly, Benkler's description of the positive force in new online enterprises must be understood in relation to the existing mainstream US media. For him it is very much a case of non-commercial grassroots initiatives versus big, commercial conglomerates.

To further our understanding, there remains a distinct need for studies based in other social, cultural and political contexts. Some do exist. In a comprehensive sociological study, Jan Schmidt (2006) argues that blogs do contribute to a structural transformation of the public sphere: they add to or supplement the mass media by offering new perspectives, new voices and new communicative modes (Schmidt 2006, 128ff). Schmidt writes in German from Germany, but although he draws on some German cases in his analysis, he also repeatedly utilizes studies of US practices, simultaneously being cautious to not claim their relevance for a German context.

Like all other cultural practices, blogging is of course different in different societies. Jaz Hee-jeong Choi's (2006) description of the growth of blogs in South Korea is a telling illustration. Choi shows how market relations and technological possibilities have helped shape a blogosphere that from the outset had features quite distinct from those found in the US. Such contributions, along with studies of blogging practices in other areas (see Russell and Echaibi (eds) 2009), take one step on the way forward. The next – and for our interest significant one – is to focus on issues of the public sphere in these non-Anglo-American contexts.

Studying the Israeli blogosphere, Carmel L. Vaisman (2009) argues that, on the one hand, Hebrew blogs may become an independent, serious player apart from the mass media. On the other hand, this means that the exchange from the blogosphere to the mainstream media is more limited than research has demonstrated in the US. Vaisman deals with the topics discussed, and the viewpoints communicated, in the blogosphere. She does not go into details on what the findings would mean for the structure of the public sphere. Aziz Douai (2009), however, does start to tackle these

issues on an overarching level when he discusses and problematizes the idea of an Arab blogosphere. Comparing it to the transnational space facilitated by satellite television, he finds the blogosphere to be more fragmented, where local issues are given prominence (Douai 2009, 142). Such seminal contributions illustrate the need for empirical testing of to what extent online media participation increases fragmentation of the public sphere in diverse settings. This is one major challenge on the way beyond the fragmentation debate.

A second challenge is illustrated by all the contributions discussed here, whether or not US based, and whether or not they focus on structural elements specifically. This challenge is theoretical at its root, and concerns the delineation of politically relevant communication. Studies of the public sphere and online media, blogs included, to an overwhelming degree tend to operate with a restricted notion of what topics are political or newsworthy, or what forms of communication are close enough to a deliberative ideal to count. Study after study concentrate on explicitly political blogs, news websites, or content relating to clear and formal political issues. Following the definitory axes outlined above, public sphere research concentrate on blogs close to the objective and topical ends. These studies seem to shun those dealing with personal experiences or emotions, or those with a confessional and personal tone. Such a delineation, where the public is seen as dealing only with formal politics, is problematic and compels us to rethink the scope of politically relevant communication.

4. Rethinking the scope of politically relevant communication in the public sphere

This is also a starting point for Chantal Mouffe's radical pluralist theory of agonistic democracy. It provides a prominent recent critique of deliberative democratic theory. Mouffe repudiates "the search for a final rational resolution" (2000, 93). Her model places questions of power at the very centre of politics, in contrast to a public sphere concept where these processes ideally are eradicated. According to her, civil society is not harmonious or unitary, but characterized by conflicts of interest and an irreducible pluralism of values. Consequently, any search for rational consensus is not only utopian, but also dangerous and necessarily exclusionary. Each consensus should rather be taken as merely a passing result of temporary hegemony, or as a momentary stabilization of power.

"The task for democratic theorists and politicians", states Mouffe "should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted" (2005, 3). The public sphere should provide channels for the expression of collective passions. It should construct opponents as adversaries – not enemies – thereby transforming antagonism to agonism. For Mouffe, then, democratic politics should not remove passions from the public sphere. Passions must rather be mobilized towards democratic designs. As such, the theory does not represent naïve pluralism, but has a clear normative force. It prescribes public communication, also in the media, to be geared at agonistic confrontation (Karppinen 2007).

This critique sheds light on often-overlooked dimensions of the workings of the public sphere. The immense literature following Habermas' work overwhelmingly focuses on a narrow range of communicative forms. In an astute work on public debate, Bernhard Peters, to choose one, claims deliberation is taking place when "empirical statements, descriptions or reports, explanations, interpretations, proposals, prescriptions, normative judgments or evaluations are supported by some kind of justification, by some argumentative backing, or by some presentation of evidence" (2004, 4). Such a demarcation excludes all fiction, poetry and satire, and even factual statements or reports given without argumentative support – in sum almost everything offered in the mediated public sphere. Elsewhere, Peters (1994, 65) identifies "expressive" communication, including music, film, and other major parts of popular culture, as constraints on the discursive structure of the public sphere. This bias is not only found within political science or sociology. Also in certain traditions of media studies analyses of news and current affairs have dominated. Written communication is preferred to visual, and narratives and rhetorical forms are given a low priority. As noted, a tendency to follow this well-trodden path can also be detected in recent analyses of online media and the public sphere (see Greggs 2006 for further discussion). This is problematic.

To grasp the role of off- and online media in democracy we can neither look exclusively at formally recognized political issues, nor limit our interest to rational deliberation, where claims are supported by arguments. We need to also take in how other forms of communication about other issues facilitate (or hinder) opinion formation and our construction of identities as citizens. We cannot understand the mediated public sphere's significance for the formation of identities, feelings of

togetherness or alienation, and the construction of autonomous citizens if we exclude large portions of their output. Individuals' and groups' self-defining and self-reflexive processes take place not only in the world of politics in a strict sense, but to a large extent in the form of social regulation achieved through shared understandings of what is and what is not acceptable social behaviour. Entertainment plays a crucial part when these understandings are debated, affirmed, or rejected. Media fiction offers "cognitive maps of reality, and furnishes social understandings which have political implications" (Curran 2002, 238). Entertainment also facilitates discussions of disputed issues like race, religion, or sexual minorities' rights. One example is the emotionally charged ethical lessons taught by melodrama (Gripsrud 1992).

Furthermore, taking part in deliberation implies willingness to let go of one's own view and adopt another. Each must proceed with fairness when meeting others' claims and opinions. This presupposes empathy. We have to be able to comprehend what it is like to be someone else and understand how they came to feel like they do. By widening or deepening the user's imagination, fiction may contribute to the formation of an individual's moral abilities, including skills vital for empathic feelings (Nussbaum 1997, 99ff). Such insights point to the importance of a cultural public sphere for the "articulation of politics, public and private, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication" (McGuigan 2005, 435).

To work as an analytical tool, a public sphere concept must encompass such aspects of mediated communication. When looking for politically relevant communication online, we need to look beyond news and factual media content, and be open to consider the relevance of participation in a wide range of genres. When dealing with blogs, we need to consider also those that content-wise are closer to the internal end of the scale than the topical, and the ones that combine intimate and objective styles. This means I subscribe to the objective of the agonistic democracy model. However, I question the incommensurability of Habermas' and Mouffe's models, persistently stressed not least by Mouffe herself[1].

Lincoln Dahlberg argues that deliberative democracy does not assume that power is separated from communication, but accounts for both positive and negative forms of power, also in the public sphere (2005, 121ff). Further, he claims that rather than prescribing the end-point of consensus, the approach promotes the process (2005, 125ff). Dahlberg also shows how a Habermasian approach is capable of

accommodating "aesthetic-affective styles of expression". Making use of an arsenal of rhetorical devices, these incorporate multiple modes of everyday communication such as rhetoric, myth, metaphor, theatre, and ceremony (Dahlberg 2005, 113-4). Such modes are all important for public debate. Aesthetic-affective modes of communication help build identities and allow for the expression of marginalized voices. They can directly set the stage for rational deliberation. As such, they can "strongly enhance acts of communication aimed at understanding that constitute the public sphere" (Dahlberg 2005, 118).

The public sphere is an arena for articulating expressions of both solidarity and difference. Consensus and conflict are co-existing impulses of political communication and political life. The question is not which one is the essence of democracy. Humans are incomplete without social order; a common language, institutional settings, sets of traditions, and political forums for articulating public purposes are indispensable to the acquisition of an identity and the commonalities essential to life (Connolly 1991, 94). But every form of social order also contains subjugations. Politics, then, is where these ambiguities can be engaged and confronted. It is where common purposes are crystallized, but also where they can be contested, exposed and unsettled (Connolly 1991, 94). I subscribe to such an understanding.

This has consequences for a research interest in how online media transforms the structure of the public sphere. It means we need to apply a wider scope when deciding which instances are relevant and which are not. We need to move beyond the convenient selection of actors' official channels, or explicitly political sources and arenas. As Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) find in a comprehensive study of Americans' use of online discussion forums: people are overwhelmingly most likely to participate in diverse leisure activities forums. As many as 53% of respondents encountered political topics within these forums. Thus, the authors conclude, "studies focusing exclusively on *political* online discussion spaces will miss these contributions entirely" (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009, 45).

Depending on the context of the study, we need to include unconventional outlets such as Italy's Bepppe Grillo. Grillo was a controversial comedian, who, having effectively been banned from television, transformed himself into a blogger criticizing prominent politicians and corporations for corruption practices and attracting vast amounts of comments and feedback – an average of over 1 000

comments per post during the blog's first year of existence (Navarria 2009). An assessment of how the structure of the Italian-language public sphere is changing would clearly be lacking without inclusion of such cases.

I have argued that to move beyond the fragmentation debate, we need to face two challenges: an empirical one that concerns the lack of data on how online media participation impinges on the structure of the public sphere outside an Anglo-American context, and a theoretical one that relates to the scope of politically relevant communication. I now sketch the design of a research project that seeks to address these challenges – a study of the blogosphere as seen from Norway.

5. Outlining a research project: The case of Norway

Norway is a small nation state of 4,8 million inhabitants. It is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government. Prior to the general election in September 2009, it has been governed for four years by a Labour party-led Centre-Left coalition. Norway is not a full member of the EU, but most legislation made by the EU is implemented in the country due to its membership in the European Economic Area. Norway ranks amongst the wealthiest countries in the world, with the largest capital reserve per capita of any nation, due mostly to its oil and gas industry. The official language is Norwegian. It shares enough characteristics with the other Scandinavian languages (Swedish and Danish) to make them partly understandable across borders. In addition, the majority of the population has good command of English, at least those born after WWII.

Norway's media system is characterized by early development of the press; a shift away from political pluralism towards a neutral commercial press; strong institutionalized professionalism; and strong state intervention (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Newspaper readership is the highest in the world with 550-600 copies sold per 1000 inhabitants (Østbye 2007). Like other Western European countries, Norway has a strong public service broadcasting tradition. The licence fee funded institution NRK is still the largest TV provider, and also offers extensive online services.

ICT's are comparatively widespread. By 2008, 90% had access to a PC at home, and 85% of Norwegians had internet access at home, spending 65 minutes online during an average day. On a list of broadband access per capita puts Norway at #7 in the world (NationMaster 2008). The online version of the countries largest tabloid – *VG* – reached 1,3 million users per day in 2007[2]. By August 2009, Alexa ranked it as

the country's number 5 website, below *Google*'s Norwegian site, *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Google.com*. The remaining list of top 20 websites reads: *Windows Live*, *Finn* (classified ads), *Dagbladet* (nation wide tabloid newspaper), *Yahoo!*, *Nettby* (social networking site for youth), *MSN*, *Wikipedia*, *Blogger*, *Yr* (weather forecast), *Aftenposten* (nationwide quality newspaper), *Gule sider* (telephone directory), *ABC startsiden* (portal), SOL (portal), *blogg* (Norwegian blog provider), and *NRK*[3].

It is notoriously difficult to measure the blogosphere. Little statistics exists of Norwegian blogs. Some estimate that the number bloggers in the country has risen from around 30 000 in 2005 to 300 000 in 2009, others guess 350 000[4]. If so, a great portion of these is abandoned. In addition to well-known providers like *blogger.com* and *wordpress.com*, there exist Norwegian alternatives like *blogg.no*. Furthermore, several major news media actors have adopted the genre and offer their own blogging services, such as VG Blogg (*www.vgb.no*).

According to *Twingly*, the top 5 blogs written in Norwegian in August 2009 were:
- *NRKBeta*: a highly topical (new media), dialogical and objective blog by the public service broadcaster's R&D department;
- *VamPus' Verden*: a mostly topical (explicitly conservative political), largely dialogical blog mixing intimate and objective styles, by a 30-something female;
- *Revolusjonært roteloft*: an internal, largely dialogical and intimate blog about "everything from poetry to personal stories in between politics and nerdy stuff" maintained by a 22-year-old female;
- *Ida Wullf*: a mostly internal blog with topical elements (fashion, but also politics), only partly dialogical and highly intimate in style. Written by an 18-year old female;
- *Sukkersött*: a topical (gift cards), dialogical and rather objective blog maintained by a group of females[5].

This list does of course just give a glimpse of the tip of the iceberg at one point in time. But combined with the political, economic, social and technological dimensions that characterize the Norwegian context, it at least forms an image of a situation markedly different from the USA and other large English-language settings. Very tentatively, the Norwegian blogosphere might be described as comparatively matured,

non-partisan, technology-heavy, with a strong presence of young voices.

This description – and the importance of applying a wide scope when studying politically relevant communication – can be illustrated by a closer look at the number 4 blog on the list above, *Ida Wullf*. By August 2009, the blog had nearly 40 000 visitors per day[6]. Since summer 2009 it has been prominently featured on the front page of mainstream online news site *Nettavisen*[7]. Wullf writes about her life as a young woman who has recently moved into her own apartment in the capitol of Oslo, and who (apparently) makes a living blogging.

A major portion of posts on *Ida Wullf* is reports on shopping, parties, time spent with friends etc. Much of it is written in a self-conscious tone, also with comments on the business of blogging (like meeting with potential sponsors), or on receiving hate mail and the public's perception of her. Yet, some posts are also clearly politically relevant. One such, published Friday August 21st, is titled "no sex, no food?!". It concerns the report of a revised Afghan law, spread through international news media the previous weekend. "Have you heard about the new law that got passed in Afghanistan?", the post opens before Wullf admits to be a bit late commenting on it. "Men can starve their women if they refuse to sleep with them", she goes on in capital, bold letters. "It HURTS my soul, do I even need to ask you what you think?!", she ends, addressing her readers[8].

In 4 days, the post generated 168 comments. The clear majority were short expressions of horror about the reports, and powerlessness. However, some offer more elaborate input. An anonymous commenter asks, "I've lived in India for several years and what we [in Norway] call forced marriage is a totally natural part of the culture. Before we try to force our norms and culture on other people we should try to imagine what they are thinking". Another, identifying himself as Omar, writes, addressing Wullf:

"You should really get better at researching. [The law] has not been passed in all of Afghanistan, it is only valid among the Hazara people, the Tajiks and the Uzbeks […]. The only reason why [President] Karzai did it was to get votes. It's a political game. Right after the election, you'll see that the law has become 'invalid'".

There are several interesting aspects of the post and its comments. First, there are no

outlinks in the post, whereas general genre expectations would lead us to expect at least a link to some information about the law. Moreover, the scarcity of links seems to characterize the blog itself. It does for instance not have a blogroll[9]. Other posts also tend to lack outlinks, unless they are to sponsors. This may signal the site's status and mission, but also illustrate an important obstacle for online two-way communication, lessening the blog's dialogical potential despite its position as densely networked. This is emphasized by a second observation: the blogger herself does not reply to any of the 168 comments made to the post, neither the supportive nor the critical ones. As a result, the comments do not seem to generate any sustained dialogue. Third, many of the commentators, especially during the first day, express shock and/or state that they had not heard the news before reading the blog post. Thus, at least 5 days after Norwegian mainstream media off- and online reported widely on the issue, *IdaWullf* seems to serve as a source of news at least for a segment of its readers. Fourth, this brief illustration underlines the potential for finding talk about politically relevant issues in unlikely places, and thus the importance of operating with a wide scope when analyzing politically relevant communication. In sum, the example signals some interesting elements that invite further scrutiny.

Norwegian media and communication researchers who have embarked on studies of blogs have tended to approach them either from journalism studies or the humanities. There are valuable studies of how mainstream online news actors incorporate new possibilities for interactions and participation (e.g. Engebretsen 2006) and studies of the relations between bloggers and the press (Ovrebø 2006). But although a Norwegian-based scholar wrote the first introductory textbook on blogs (Rettberg 2008), no comprehensive study mapping the Norwegian blogosphere exists. Such a mapping could provide insight into the ways in which blogging in Norway compare to other cases, and also enable us to better assess the impact of this dimension of online media participation on the structure of the public sphere.

6. Outlining a research project: Methodologies
Methodologically, a study of the blogosphere as seen from Norway can be based on a combination of a quantitative analytical mapping and detailed, interpretative close reading of a strategic sample of different blogs.

The quantitative elements will concentrate on hyperlinks to map networks of connections within the blogosphere, and from blogs to other kinds of websites. How,

and how often, do Norwegian blogs link to other blogs, and to mainstream news sites or corporate informational sites? Are the links reciprocated? A first set of data for the quantitative analyses will consist of issue network maps, tracking how an issue – like a pertinent political controversy – is written about across time and space on the internet. This facilitates analyses of how blogs deal with an issue, if and how they link to sources, and whether bloggers discuss each other's entries. Data collection can utilize computer software that performs online searches for this purpose – like *IssueCrawler*[10]. *Issuecrawler* is a piece of web network location software. The user selects URLs ("seeds") that the software crawls. It then captures page or site links from these "seeds", follows them for maximum of three steps, performs co-link analysis of the captured links[11], and outputs the results in lists and visualizations (Rogers 2009).

In a thorough discussion of methodological aspects with using *Issuecrawler*, Axel Bruns argues that the software is "predominately designed for identifying 'issue networks', that is, networks of web sites which form around the interlinkage and exchange of information pertaining to specific issues or topics (Bruns 2007, 3). This resonates well with the object of the project outlined here. Combined with information on hits and sender descriptions, this data – including network maps – can be used in visualizations of actual uses, analyzed for notable patterns, and yield an understanding of the networked character of the blogosphere seen from Norway. The data can also lead to a closer scrutiny of key sites. Such an explorative methodology is preferred to mappings of solely category-based samples of blogs (e.g. Hargittai 2008) due to the uncharted terrain of the Norwegian blogosphere, as well as the absence of an identifiable, substantial body of clearly partisan blogs. Furthermore, provided that the "seeds" fed to the crawler are able to catch the relevant contributions, *Issuecrawler* does not discriminate between pre-defined "political" and "non-political" blogs. Therefore, the data should include politically relevant communication in non-political settings.

Mapping the Australian political blogosphere in 2007, partly using *IssueCrawler*, Axel Bruns and Debra Adams (2009) found conditions clearly different from the USA. The Australian blogosphere showed a considerable left-wing inclination with strong polarization on specific issues. Their analysis also identify a kind of division of labour on either side (liberal and conservative) where a limited number of central nodes acted as "'keepers of the flame'", surrounded by more

peripheral blogs (Bruns and Adams 2009, 94). Interestingly, Bruns and Adams argue that outlinks – references to outside sources – are limited. And political blogging seem more be based on what the mainstream media report on a political issue, than political events themselves. This should be seen in connection with the finding that little interaction existed between mainstream media and blogs. The latter was a catalyst, rather than a participant (Bruns and Adams 2009, 94-95).

The Norwegian situation in 2009 differs in a number of ways from the Australian in 2007. As noted, the Norwegian blogosphere appears less defined by partisan actors. Yet, one might hypothesize that a leftist bias is present there as well. On the other hand, the rapid growth in the latter years of tools which enable embedding of blog or twitter feeds into mainstream news providers' websites, as well as track back of blogs' links to that website could facilitate closer connections between the blogosphere and mainstream media. The study outlined here will attempt to test such hypothesis. In sum, a mapping based on *Issuecrawler* or similar tools should contribute valuable data to an assessment of how the blogosphere as a key instance of online media participation affects the structure of the public sphere.

Data collection with tools like *Issuecrawler* requires the seeds to be of some centrality or size in order to generate a coherent crawl. To further the analysis, data collection of linking practices will also be done by following links from a large body of randomly chosen blogs through a number of levels. This complementing mapping should add insight into the general state of the blogosphere. Importantly, while studies tend to concentrate on an elite minority of blogs, often explicitly political (the so-called "A-list" blogs), this data collection will offer a look at the blogosphere "from the ground up". Providing data on both the communicative forms, and their geographical and linguistic spread, the mapping of such linking practices is valuable for testing the overall impact of web-based interactions on the mediated public sphere in Norway.

This kind of data collection can help us assess claims that most blogs are little more than isolated outlets for personal expression, with little hope of, or wish for, reciprocity. One interesting empirical study of practices of linking in the US blogosphere – concentrating on randomly selected blogs, rather than the popular "A-list blogs" – found that in the sample, "a majority of blogs link sparsely or not at all to other blogs" (Herring et al. 2005, 1). Moreover, much linking was one-way. "The blogosphere is partially connected and sporadically conversational", the authors

suggest (Herring et al. 2005, 1). While such findings might not be overtly unexpected by now, they certainly help us construct a sound understanding of the state of the blogosphere and how it contributes to the balance between dissemination and dialogue in the public sphere.

On the one hand, this kind of data collection requires close attention to sampling, not least considering the ephemeral and changing nature of a large amount of blogs, the danger of sampling spam blogs, abandoned blogs and access-restricted blogs (see Li and Walejko 2008 for methodological considerations). The collection also requires that attention be paid to non-traditional blogs and other amorphous forms. On the other hand, the data collection can start from an interest in an extensive range of discursive forms, thereby avoiding the limiting demarcation of politically relevant communication, genres and applications as discussed above. In sum, such data should allow discussion of the blogosphere's (lack of) adherence to national borders, and the dialogical dimensions of blog use. Is it best understood as a reciprocal conversation in defined sub-spheres, or as one-way communication to an infinite number of anonymous, widespread recipients?

The set of data for a quantitative analysis will be complemented by a qualitative element, which also scrutinizes blogs, but potentially add more novel web applications like certain social networking sites and user-generated topical sites. Like blogs, such applications are not only used by prominent actors for strictly political or factual content, but also by less visible actors for a wide range of content types. Like the blog, these applications facilitate linking, as well as filtering and aggregation of information. Unlike the blog, however, they are difficult to include in methodologically rigorous mappings, given their novelty and features. Consequently, to grasp the structural dimensions of their uses, the study outlined here will apply a correspondingly broad approach.

The data collection for the qualitative analyses will strategically select websites to be studied in detail. The selection will also seek to go beyond the predominantly written character of the samples in the quantitative analyses, to include communicative forms dependent on audiovisual content. Specific selection will be based on initial findings from the quantitative data collection, and also seek to identify types of blogs not covered by the mappings (one possible example being *Ida Wullf*, discussed above, given its apparent lack of outlinks).

In this qualitative investigation, the project will build on textual-analytical

methods developed within media studies and neighbouring disciplines. These will be mobilized, and adapted, to the study of the mixed online texts to facilitate categorizations of content types (Fagerjord 2006). The basic unit of analysis will be websites, which will be collected and archived. Through varied textual elements, a website serves to keep its individual web pages together. Thus, it constitutes coherence in a fleeting online environment, and warrants examination (Brügger 2007). Importantly, scrutiny will not be limited to interpreting the structure or features of an individual site, but also present systematic analysis of each site's situatedness in a larger network (e.g. Schneider and Foot 2004). The data should enable a focus on style, and help capture the dynamic moving target of blogs.

A combination of insights from the quantitative data mapping and qualitative textual interpretation will strengthen the reliability and validity of the study's findings. Together, the analysis should further our understanding of the communicative forms of online media participation, and its impact on the structure of the public sphere in a non-English context.

7. Conclusion

The starting point for this paper has been the ongoing debate about if and how digital media facilitate a fragmentation of the public sphere, with political balkanization and erosion of social life as the potential outcome. The aim of the paper is to instigate further discussion, partly through conceptual groundwork and partly through methodological considerations. I have argued that to move our understanding forward, internet research as a critical practice needs to consider both a theoretical and an empirical shortcoming.

Firstly, critical aspects of normative public sphere theory and our employment of it needs to be rethought. Research on off- as well as online media and the public sphere tends to stick with a too restricted concept of politically relevant communication – often leaving out all that does not fit an ideal of deliberation aimed at consensus. Rather than following this well-trodden path, we need to reconsider issues of exclusion, power and difference, and the value of a broad range of communicative forms and genres in the public sphere. To work as an analytical tool, a concept of the public sphere must encompass such aspects of mediated communication. This theoretical reframing, I have maintained, should have consequences for the design of empirical investigations.

Secondly, to move beyond Anglo-American generalizations I have argued that we need more analyses that start in non-English language areas. As a first step on the way to meet the theoretical and empirical challenges, I have outlined the methodological set up of a study of the blogosphere as seen from Norway. The study is designed to combine quantitative mappings with qualitative analyses of specific sites, their communicative styles and structures. Encompassing an extensive range of discursive forms, such analyses should build on textual-analytical methods adapted to the study of the mixed online texts. In combination with a multilayered mapping of linking practices, the approach should help us understand the communicative forms of online media participation, and its impact on the structure of the public sphere.

[7680 words]

Endnotes

[1] This opposition can also be found in recent discussions of the democratic potential of online media. Bart Cammaerts (2008, 359), for instance, argues that key characteristics of the blogosphere make it "not very compatible with a reference to Habermas' public sphere theory". Instead, he opts for Mouffe's ideas. Cammaerts argument relates to two works by Habermas published 46 and 44 years ago. It does not deal with later revisions, as laid out here. Moreover, Cammaerts seems to confuse the historical study of a bourgeois public sphere with the normative potential of public sphere theory.

[2] All data from http://www.medienorge.no

[3] http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/NO

[4] http://www.fvn.no/tema/teknologi/article655750.ece, *BT-Magasinet*, 22.08.09, p. 33.

[5] http://nrkbeta.no, http://vampus.blogspot.com, http://www.virrvarr.net/blog, http://caffelatte.blogg.no, http://sukkersott.blogspot.com. List accessed August 25th 2009 at http://www.twingly.com/top100?lang=no (excluding the English language *Tehran 24* photo blog which Twingly rates as no. 5).

[6] http://www.blogglisten.no/blogg/241

[7] www.nettavisen.no

[8] http://caffelatte.blogg.no/1250880225_ingen_sex_ingen_mat.html

[9] A blogroll is a list of links to other blogs that reads as a list of recommendations.

[10] www.govcom.org/scenarios_use.html.

[11] A co-link analysis filters out sites which are somewhat reciprocal, that is linked to by at least two of the "seed" URLs.

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