RETHINKING THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE CYBER PUBLIC: FROM CONSENSUS TO CONTESTATION

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Abstract:

Recently there has been some debate between deliberative democrats about whether the internet is leading to the fragmentation of communication into 'like-minded' groups. This article is concerned with what is held in common by both sides of the debate: a public sphere model that aims for all-inclusive, consensus seeking rational deliberation that eliminates intergroup 'polarizing' politics. It argues that this understanding of deliberative democracy fails to adequately consider the asymmetries of power through which deliberation and consensus are achieved, the inter-subjective basis of meaning, the centrality of respect for difference in democracy, and the democratic role of 'like-minded' deliberative groups. The deliberative public sphere must be rethought to account more fully for these four aspects. The article draws on post-Marxist discourse theory and conceptualizes the public sphere as a space constituted through discursive contestation. Taking this radicalized norm, it considers what research is needed to understand the democratic implications of the formation of 'like-minded' groups online.

Key words:

Deliberative democracy • fragmentation • internet • public sphere • radical democracy

INTRODUCTION

There has been much academic discussion and increasing research on the possibility of the internet facilitating the idea of a public sphere (e.g. Becker and Wehner, 2001; Dahlgren, 2001; Gandy, 2002; Gimmler, 2001; Graham, 2002; Noveck, 2000; Papacharissi, 2002, 2004; Sparks, 2001;Tanner, 2001). Generally speaking, the public sphere is constituted by open, reasoned and reflexive communication. More specifically, drawing upon Jürgen Habermas, whose work is the starting point for much internet public sphere theory and research, the public sphere is based on the schematization and critique of moral, ethical and pragmatic validity claims, accompanied by inclusive, sincere and respectful reasoning.1 This sphere is seen as central to strong democracy, enabling the voicing of diverse views on any issue, the constitution of publicly-oriented citizens, the scrutiny of power and, ultimately, public sovereignty. In contemporary, large-scale, dispersed and complex societies, time–distance 'defying' media are required to support such communicative action. A variety of critical theorists have shown that the modern mass media (print and broadcasting) have largely failed in this role (see Boggs, 2000; Curran, 2000; Gandy, 2002; Habermas, 1989 [1962]; Kellner, 2004; McChesney, 1999; Savigny, 2002). In contrast, the internet has been seen as offering citizens the opportunity to encounter and engage with a huge diversity of positions, thus extending the public sphere (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001; Gimmler, 2001; Kellner, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002).Through email, discussion sites, web publishing and

webcasting, a great variety of actors articulate and critique validity claims locally, nationally and internationally. However, those researching the possibility of the internet expanding democratic culture also point to significant factors limiting open and reflexive debate online, including inequalities in access and participation, un reflexive communication, corporate domination of online attention and state surveillance and censorship (Dahlberg, 2001, 2005b; Gomez, 2004; Hoar and Hope, 2002; Murdock and Golding, 2004;Wilhelm, 2000). Furthermore, a number of internet-democracy commentators question whether the myriad of diverse views that exist online are actually intersecting, and thus the extent to which online interactions actually involve any significant problem activation and contestation of positions and practices. These commentators argue that much online interaction simply involves the meeting of 'like-minded' individuals, leading to a fragmented public sphere of insulated 'deliberative enclaves' where group positions and practices are reinforced rather than openly critiqued. In contrast, other commentators argue the opposite: those online participants readily seek out and deliberate with actors holding markedly different views, thus expanding the public sphere. In this article I will focus on this fragmentation question and associated debate in order to not only think of how to develop a better understanding of the specific problem being addressed, but also (and more significantly) as a way to contribute to the ongoing development, interrogation and rethinking of public sphere theory. I begin by re-presenting the arguments of each side of the fragmentation debate, arguing that more empirical research is needed to decide the dispute. However, I also argue that any such research would be of limited value to understanding the internet–democracy relationship because certain assumptions that underlie the debate are flawed. These flawed assumptions result in a failure to consider adequately the asymmetries of power within which deliberation and consensus are achieved, the inter subjective basis of meaning and rationality, the centrality of respect for difference in democracy and the democratic role of 'like-minded' deliberative groups. This article argues that these flaws result directly from the limitations of the particular deliberative democracy model of the public sphere which is deployed in the debate, and which is drawn largely from Habermasian theory. I propose that the public sphere be re-conceptualized around both intra- and inter-discursive contestation. I develop such a discursive conceptualization by drawing from post-Marxist discourse theory, which provides the necessary resources for the required task. As such, the article goes well beyond the internet-fragmentation debate, utilizing discourse theory to develop a radical public sphere conception. However, in conclusion I return to the initial problem and reflect upon how the proposed discursively conceived radical democratic model of the public sphere can be deployed best to examine the question of fragmentation of online communication and the extension of democracy through the internet.

THE FRAGMENTATION DEBATE

A number of commentators warn that, despite the enormous diversity of views and identities on the internet, online participants generally seek out information and interaction that reinforces their private positions, avoiding meaningful engagement with difference (e.g. Graham, 1999; Harmon, 2004; Selnow, 1998; Shapiro, 1999; Sunstein, 2001).The internet is seen as increasingly giving users the ability to 'filter' information and interactions and so 'self-select' what they wish to be exposed to. Examples of this filtering include users setting and returning to their preferred sites via web favorites or bookmarks, reading and interacting on sites that support

their 'personal' views, linking their sites to similar sites, choosing customization of news and using search engines to seek out information on very specific 'private' interests. A comparison is often made in this line of argument between offline and online encounters. Offline, generally people cannot help but run into difference in everyday public experience. Online, however, serendipitous encounters largely can be avoided and opposing positions easily bypassed. Furthermore, these commentators point to research indicating that even where deliberation does take place, any strong disagreement and argument generally tails off rapidly. Both Hill and Hughes' (1998) and Wilhelm's (1999) research of online groups shows that even those groups focused upon (political) issues and expected to involve diverse opinions often simply develop into ideologically homogeneous 'communities of interest'. The result of this filtering is that users are being exposed to a limited set of views and identities, which coincide with positions held before online interaction. So while debate may be found to occur in online spaces, these commentators see argument as largely between 'like-minded' others with 'shared identity'. The internet contributes to a fragmentation of the public sphere into what Sunstein (2001) calls 'deliberative enclaves', deliberating groups that are more or less insulated from opposing positions. Moreover, according to Sunstein, by supporting these 'deliberative enclaves' the internet not only extends social fragmentation, but also has become a 'breeding ground for group polarization and extremism' (2001: 67, 71).According to Sunstein, this is due to 'the nature' of deliberation with others of shared identity. Drawing on previous research into group deliberation, Sunstein explains that: 'After deliberation, people are likely to move towards a more extreme point in the direction to which the groups' members were originally inclined' (2001: 65–6).This shift to more 'extreme' positions within 'deliberative enclaves' leads to polarization between differently positioned groups. This polarization, in turn, is seen as limiting the possibility of understanding differently situated others, increasing the likelihood of hostility and even violence and thus posing a threat both to the public sphere and to social stability (Graham, 1999; Sunstein 2001, 2003).2 The argument that the internet encourages the fragmentation of deliberation and polarization of positions in society is strongly contested by other internet-democracy commentators (e.g. Balkin, 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2003;Weinberger, 2004).These commentators point to research that indicates that people are meeting difference and engaging in debate with others of opposing positions. They argue that research shows that, as well as helping people find groups of similar interest and identity, the internet is being used by many people encounter difference that they would not normally encounter in everyday life. For example, The Pew Center's Online Communities study found that most United States' internet users report meeting others they would not otherwise meet in their offline interactions (Horrigan, 2001).Another Pew survey of internet use in the run up to the 2004 US presidential election, concluded that 'internet users are not insulating themselves in information echo chambers. Instead, they are exposed to more political arguments than nonusers' (Horrigan et al., 2004: i–ii). Peter Muhlberger (2004) 'measured' polarization in political discussion on the internet by analysing a representative survey of Pittsburgh residents. He concluded that there was no significant polarization of political attitudes or views on the internet, and moreover that trends imply modestly lower polarization than offline. Jennifer Stromer-Galley's (2003) argument against the fragmentation thesis is supported by her interviews with 69 participants in online discussion spaces devoted to politics and current events. She reports that rather than avoid difference online, interview

participants sought encounters with opposing perspectives. Moreover, participants believed that the internet provided much greater opportunity to engage with different perspectives than offline situations. Thus, these commentators paint a significantly more positive picture of present online deliberative culture than those who warn of a fragmentation and polarization of political communication through the internet. This fragmentation debate remains unresolved because of the limited empirical data available. The two sides currently support their contentions by way of a very small pool of observations. Measurements also tend to be used selectively. For example, Hill and Hughes' (1998) research into explicitly political Usenet groups and America Online (AOL) chat found that debate – 'people with different opinions' clashing in 'a battle of ideas' (1998: 58, 114) – constituted the majority of the content of these online interactions. This supports the second position, that the internet is encouraging the meeting of difference and deliberation. However, the same research, as noted previously, found that debate in such groups moves towards ideological homogeneity, supporting the first fragmentation position. Moreover, as with research in general, research design steers results towards certain answers. For example, the second position generally refers to research into active participation in explicitly political groups, where one is likely to find those people most interested in encountering difference online. This does not apply to the Pew survey work. However this research is marked by other design limitations. For example, Horrigan et al.'s (2004) operationalization assumes that 'collisions' and 'challenges' to views can be determined simply by measuring the 'exposure' of users to a range of arguments related to four 'significant issues' (presidential campaign positions, the Iraq War, gay marriage and free trade). Furthermore, the representative range of arguments selected for the measurement of 'exposure' were positions that one could come across on the websites of any of the dominant news media, which Horrigan et al.'s research confirms most users visit frequently (typically, the respondents were asked if they had come across such arguments as: 'Iraq posed an imminent threat to American security'). Given this and the fact that such news sites aim to signify 'balance' and 'objectivity' by giving various 'sides' of positions, it would not be hard to find a sizable number of online users who at some stage had been 'exposed' to a variety of positions on these issues. The research says nothing about exposure to more 'radical' positions, let alone deliberative contestation. The way to resolve the fragmentation debate seems quite clear: to 'measure' more accurately the level of engagement with difference online. Of course, this is no easy task given the complexity, diversity and extensiveness of internet communication. Moreover, it may not be a necessary task. This is because there are problems with some of the shared and largely unquestioned assumptions standing behind the debate, problems that need to be examined before any 'measurement' of engagement and fragmentation is carried out. This article will now undertake this examination, before rethinking the public sphere conception and the question of online fragmentation in relation to the role of the internet in the enhancement of democratic culture.

EXAMINING THE FRAGMENTATION DEBATE

Despite disagreement at the empirical level, the fragmentation debate operates largely among deliberative democratic 'friends'. In other words, the two sides largely agree upon what democracy and the public sphere should involve and upon the corresponding ideal role of communication. The fragmentation debate generally3 assumes that deliberation within groups of

similar identity, among 'like-minded' people, is ultimately a serious danger to democracy and society at-large. The reasoning is that such deliberation leads to the formation of 'extreme' views, which in turn leads to 'polarization' between groups, followed by a failure of the public sphere and, finally, to social destabilization. These commentators assume that such polarization to 'extreme' views can be overcome by rational deliberation between 'unlike-minded' individuals and groups. Engagement in rational deliberation with different others will lead individuals and groups away from 'extreme' views and towards a 'more reasonable' position, a middle-ground compromise that avoids social destabilization (see Sunstein, 2001).Thus, rational deliberation operates to help overcome difference and disagreement and bring about consensus and social cohesion. In other words, both sides of the debate assume a liberal rationalist, consensus-oriented model of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, where difference is ultimately a problem to be dealt with, a threat to the formation of public opinion and social stability. The desire to observe different others meeting and engaging in disagreement, and the argument about how much this is taking place, is tied to a desire to see these disagreements and differences overcome through rational interaction. I will highlight four significant, overlapping problems in the assumptions here.4 First, the assumed model of the public sphere fails to consider fully the role of power in the process of rational deliberation and in any resulting consensus. The problem here is not that power is left untreated, but that particular aspects of power are emphasized while others are ignored. The model focuses on difference as a force of societal disruption and on the power of rational argument in moving disputes towards consensus. However, the model tends to overemphasize these aspects of power while largely neglecting the asymmetries in power involved in bringing about agreements and overcoming difference in deliberations. Disparities in social, cultural and economic capital influence who can speak, what can be said and how interaction is undertaken. Closely related to this first problem, the particular model of the public sphere assumed in the debate fails to conceptualize adequately the inter subjective basis of meaning and rationality. Rather, the fragmentation debate sees individuals as making rational (autonomous and transparent) choices, within the limits of the internet tools available, as to whom they will interact with and how. For those who decide to interact rationally with different others, reasoning unproblematic ally leads towards understanding and consensus. This presumes a unified, transcendent subject who stands in a highly reflective relation to their interests, values and feelings and in relation to others and the world at large. As such, this Cartesian type subject can clearly communicate their own position and fully understand the other's meaning. Moreover, this subject can engage in reasoning that moves deliberation towards rational consensus through distinguishing between better and worse arguments, good and bad reasons, true and untrue claims, persuasion and coercion. In other words, the model posits a naive theory of the autonomous-rational subject and the transparency of meaning (and thus of power). Such a subject is associated with a particular liberal democratic model of meaning and rationality, rather than the inter-subjective and discursive emphasis of critical theory-based models of deliberative democracy, such as those of Benhabib (1996), Dryzek (2000) and Habermas (1996). The third problem is associated with the particular model's democratic validity: the model fails to theorize respect for difference as a fundamental end of democracy. Difference is seen as a threat to social stability, to be overcome by rational deliberation aimed at consensus. Certainly, not all differences should be respected, specifically those that refuse to

accept the existence of other differences and the pluralization of lifestyles. However, this exception simply emphasizes that respect for difference – the maximizing of space for the effective articulation and practice of cultural diversity – is at the very heart of democracy. The fourth problem is that the model fails to theorize adequately the positive role in democracy and society at large of both deliberation within 'like-minded' groups and the subsequent fostering of 'extreme' positions. Sunstein admits that 'deliberative enclaves' may be useful for democratic society in exceptional circumstances, to foster the development of socially beneficial voices 'that would otherwise be invisible, silenced or squelched in general debate' (2001: 75–6). He gives the US 'civil rights movement, the antislavery movement and the movement for sex equality' as examples that 'bred greater extremism', yet society was better off as a result (2001: 75). However, this is a retrospective approach that judges affirmatively only certain 'extremes' selected on their positive impact with regards to liberal democratic values and goals. In general, Sunstein sees 'deliberative enclaves' as socially destructive, warning of the 'serious danger in such enclaves' (2001: 77).The naming of one position as 'extreme', and another as 'moderate' or 'middle ground' and the promotion of the latter as the most 'reasonable', is highly ideological in that it promotes the status quo definition of what is 'extreme' and 'moderate', with the result of reinforcing the position of dominant groups. 'Extremes' actually may be more positive in terms of democracy than the defined 'middle ground', particularly in more authoritarian and totalitarian political systems. Moreover, the 'middle ground' between two positions may not be the most socially beneficial, as Sunstein (2001) suggests that it is. For example, the 'middle ground' between fascism and cosmopolitanism may not be as reasonable as a strong cosmopolitanism, if one is judging reasonableness by norms of democratic inclusion. Hence, the particular conception of the public sphere assumed in the fragmentation debate is inadequate. This is a conception drawn largely from the deliberative democratic theory of Habermas and those sympathetic to his work.This means that the Habermasian model, despite its sophistication, is open to a rationalist, consensus-oriented reading that displays the four problems listed previously. However, one would not suggest discarding the public sphere conception altogether, as some internet-democracy theorists have called for on finding limitations with the deployment of particular versions of the public sphere in cyber discourse (Dean, 2002; Poster, 1997). Open, reasoned and reflexive contestation of norms is central to strong democracy, whether we call this the public sphere or something else. Rather than discarding the conception, what is needed is its re-radicalizing. The're' here refers to the fact that Habermas' Frankfurt School-inspired public sphere conception was developed as a radical democratic idealization. However, as Dryzek (2000) argues, Habermasian deliberative democracy has been increasingly reread in a liberal fashion, losing its critical force and allowing for the rationalist, consensus reading outlined here.A re-radicalization is needed, a task that I will now perform as a contribution to the ongoing radical democratic theorization of the public sphere being undertaken by a range of critical theorists (see Benhabib, 1996; Dryzek, 2000; Fraser, 1997; Mouffe, 2000, 2005;Warner, 2002;Young, 2001).

(RE-)RADICALIZING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

To avoid the flawed reading of the public sphere conception developed in the fragmentation debate, the concept needs to be rethought to account more fully for the power relations within the

deliberative process, the inter subjective basis of meaning and rationality, respect for difference and the democratic role of 'like-minded' deliberative groups (including so-called 'extremes').To undertake this reconceptualization, this article will draw on insights from post-Marxist discourse theory, which provides the necessary resources for thinking through the relationship between democracy, power, inter-subjectivity, difference and contestationary politics. Mouffe (2000), along with others, has strongly critiqued Habermasian deliberative democracy and yet has found the public sphere concept to be necessary when talking about radical democracy (see, in particular, Mouffe, 2005; Mouffe et al., 1999). However, there is yet to be a systematic post-Marxist discourse theoretic development (or articulation) of the public sphere conception that overcomes rationalist, consensus readings. Such an articulation begins in this article, supporting other critical theory efforts to re-radicalize the public sphere.5 First, I will focus on the question of how power and the social embedded ness of deliberation can be taken into account more fully. Second, this then prompts a rethinking of the normative conception of the public sphere, which will make more room for difference and 'like-minded' deliberations. Both the power relations within deliberation and the inter-subjective basis of rationality can be understood more adequately by deploying the concept of discourse, as drawn from post-Marxist discourse theory. Discourse here is defined as socially contingent systems of meaning, which form the identities of subjects and objects (Howarth, 2000; Laclau, 1993; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Discourses frame horizons of meaning, fashioning human understanding and practice, including argument in deliberative contexts (delimiting who says what, when and how). All framing of meaning, including what it means to be rational, necessarily involves exclusion. A relation of inclusion/exclusion is part of the very logic of discourse, even democratic discourse (Mouffe, 2000).There is always an 'outside' to discourse, a set of meanings, practices, identities and social relations, which is defined by exclusion and against which discursive boundaries are drawn. This always-existing relation of inside/outside is fundamentally political because it involves an antagonistic (or contestationary) struggle to establish the taken-for-granted social order, including the boundaries of 'legitimate' deliberation. In other words, it involves a struggle for cultural domination, for hegemony. This struggle leads to a differentiation between the dominant discourses that achieve authoritative status and subordinate discourses that are marginalized or even silenced (note, referring to earlier, this marginalization could happen by being defined as 'extreme'). This power differential between discourses is associated with (is formed by and affects the formation of) social hierarchies of dominant and marginalized identities, some identities achieving advantaged social positions in relation to dominant discourse (Fraser, 1997).As Fraser says, 'hegemony points to the intersection of power, inequality and discourse' (1997: 154). So consensus over the boundaries of discourse, and any consensus resulting from deliberations within these boundaries, is always intertwined with asymmetrical power relations and a struggle for domination. As Mouffe (2000) explains, any consensus is always at least partially a result of hegemony, a stabilization of meaning aided by cultural domination and exclusion. But consensus also exists only as a 'temporary result of a provisional hegemony' (2000: 104).Any new consensus (hegemonic stabilization) is precarious because it is always achieved by the exclusion of certain elements that haunt or antagonize identity. Consensus always involves a systematic lack, the source of antagonism and destabilization. Thus, consensus is necessarily contingent. To account for this understanding of the discursive operation of power

and avoid the liberal-rationalist consensus reading of the fragmentation debate, we need to rethink the ideal of contestation central to the general definition of the public sphere so as to include inter-discursive, as well as intra-discursive, contestation. Discursive contestation here is not simply an empirical description, but a normative requirement for advancing the public sphere.6 Effective challenges to discursive boundaries (i.e. inter-discursive contestation) open up space for excluded voices, fostering greater intra-discursive contestation or deliberation. In the process, consensus and hegemony are continually questioned. Consensus in the public sphere is, then, simply one point in a dynamic process. Based on discursive contestation, the public sphere formulation avoids both the embrace of consensus as the aim of contestation (as in the case of some deliberative democrats), and the total rejection of consensus in democratic culture.7 We can now say that the public sphere is expanded by expanding discursive contestation and particularly by expanding contestation of the boundary of dominant discourses. Both the form and the extent of contestation are important. However, the question of the form of either intra- or interdiscursive contestation will not be explored here, as it is examined elsewhere (see for example, Dahlberg, 2005a; Mouffe, 2000). Rather, this section will focus upon the extent of the expansion of the public sphere by the expansion of (intra- and inter-) discursive contestation, which is more relevant than the form of discourse to the question of fragmentation. For this expansion of contestation we require: first, multiple and vibrant spaces of deliberative discourse (intra-discursive contestation) outside the dominant; and second, inter-discursive contestation (especially of dominant discourse) leading to openings and movements in discourse. These requirements not only make room for the operation of power and the discursive nature of meaning and rationality, but for the respect of difference and the role of 'like-minded' group deliberation, thus answering to the second two problems of the liberal-rationalist, consensus-oriented deliberative model. Indeed, fragmentation into 'like-minded' groups that contribute to a plurality of counter-discourses can now be conceived as beneficial for democracy. As Laclau notes, for contemporary societies 'the fragmentation of social identities and proliferation – in a computerized civilization – of new forms of social mediation, gives democracy its specific fragility, but also its inherent political possibilities' (2000: 143). However, fragmentation only extends democracy if the plurality of identities leads to the effective contestation of dominance. Strategies for increasing the effectiveness of discursive contestation are theorized by Laclau (1990, 1996) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001). These theorists argue that political success depends upon linking fragmented struggles via 'chains of equivalence', where solidarity is formed through identification with a particular element that has been raised to the place of a representative signifier. This articulation of disparate identities establishes a 'counter-hegemonic front', which can lead to effective opposition of dominant discourses. Increasing fragmentation and dispersion of identities without such articulation will lead to systemic transformation and assimilation of particularity. This is not the place to explore the details of political strategy. What needs to be emphasized is that fragmentation is dangerous for democracy when not accompanied by the articulation of (marginalized) identities. 'Counter' here is not confined to explicit contestation. Counter indicates that these discourses are defined against or in opposition to a (more) dominant discourse. By the logic of exclusion discussed previously, counter-discourses emerge in response to exclusions within dominant discourses. Counter discourse is constituted by the circulation, deliberation and articulation of issues, identities, positions, etc., which have

been excluded from, and thus stand in opposition to, dominant discourses. Counter-discourse (with associated arenas, mediums, spaces, texts, etc.) provides safe spaces for the exploration and nurturing of marginalized voices ('extreme' positions and identities) before explicit engagement with and challenge to dominant discourses in 'mainstream' communication arenas.8 The provision of safe spaces is particularly important in situations where dominant discourses achieve a near (never full) silencing of excluded voices in society – a homogenization of the social space as, for example, under totalitarianism. In this way, a counterdiscourse that is not explicitly contesting dominant discourse is not regressive in terms of democracy, as fragmentation commentators largely assume in relation to isolated radical groups.What could be seen as an 'enclave' state, where counter-discourse largely circulates within closed spaces, provides an important step in building alternative visions of life before contributing to opening the boundary of dominant discourse through more explicit forms of contestation (publicity, protest, activism, etc.). Thinking in these discursive contestationary terms shifts the public sphere's conception towards a radical democratic understanding, in that it expands the space for the effective participation in politics of different and marginal voices, while accounting for power and inter-subjectivity.This radical conceptualization provides a stronger basis for not only the exploration of online democracy, but for public sphere research and theorizing in general, moving theory and research beyond the questions of the liberal-rationalist consensus model.To conclude, I will return to the fragmentation debate and briefly consider how the radical conception reorients the research focus of the dispute.

REFOCUSING INTERNET–PUBLIC SPHERE RESEARCH (BEYOND THE FRAGMENTATION DEBATE)

For research framed by the fragmentation debate, the problem is to ascertain the sheer amount of deliberation taking place online between differently positioned individuals.With the revised, discursively conceived radical democratic model of the public sphere, the research question reorients to focus on contestation within and between discourse. Now, the general question is: to what extent is the internet facilitating the development and expansion of counter-discourses and the contestation between discourses? Here these two aspects of the question will be explored briefly, in order to develop directions for future research, drawing on what is presently understood about online interaction. In terms of supporting counter-discourse, it is clear from research on civil society and social movement uses of the internet that the medium is supporting a diversity of counter-discourse through email lists, web forums, weblogs, web publishing and webcasting (Downing, 2001; Gallo, 2003; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; Meikle, 2002; Salazer, 2003;Van de Donk et al., 2004;Webster, 2001). However, it is also well known that asymmetries in power offline are being replicated online, leading to inequalities in how different discourses are enabled and fostered online.Asymmetries in offline social, cultural and economic capital lead to asymmetries between voices online (Murdock and Golding, 2004). The problem here is not simply to do with the fact that not everyone has access to the internet. Discussion of, and calls for, overcoming the 'digital divide' are often part of a dominant discourse of capitalist consumer relations and liberal-individualist politics: the internet is promoted as providing for individual need satisfaction by facilitating economic and political market transaction (individuals making their choices between competing options through shopping and aggregative systems of

democracy). Providing universal internet access may then simply end up supporting dominant discourse – attracting people into spaces of liberal capitalist practice while obscuring this structuring of online space, the associated asymmetries of power and the lack of any significant institutional change. Rather than simply questioning individual access and skills, we need to consider the extent to which resource inequalities determine how discourses are fostered online. Investigations have already been undertaken to explore the structuring of 'publicly performed' online environments by major media corporations in favour of dominant discourses (see Dahlberg, 2005b; Hargittai, 2004; Patelis, 2000). More work in this area would be valuable, looking into how these corporations draw participants into online spaces structured by dominant discourse. Research is also needed on how capital differentials affect the particular counter-discourses fostered online. One would expect that the extent and direction of the development of counterdiscourse depends on the distribution of networking resources. For example, we could predict that anti-globalization and environmental discourses are given a Western framing, given the dominance of Western subjects actively contributing to these discourses online. Countering this, there are significant initiatives and networks giving voice to claims that otherwise would be unheard online (and offline), linking marginalized positions together and strengthening counter-discourses. For example, the Association for Progressive Communications (www.apc.org) is a global network of civil society organizations dedicated to supporting progressive groups through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), by providing internet access, information (e.g. information on ICT policy and digital technology rights) and applications (e.g. web publishing software).As well as assisting technically, the APC links non-governmental organization (NGO) sites, supporting the articulation of marginalized identities.Another example is the human rights project Witness (www.witness.org), which gives local activists around the world video cameras and field training and then webcasts the resulting stories.There are many more examples, including the networks that support the critical publicity of the now-legendary Zapatistas. To what extent then are marginalized discourses and identities offline being fostered online? To what extent are such discourses being systematically re-marginalized online so that the internet is simply becoming a space colonized by offline dominant discourse, if not an elite public sphere, as Sparks (2001) argues? This question is largely ignored in the fragmentation debate. Rather than focusing upon the extent of individual deliberations with differently positioned others, the focus of research must turn to the formation of counter-discourses online and then to the extent and effects of interdiscursive contestation. In terms of exploring the contestation between discourses, at first glance the internet seems to be a mosaic of intersecting and clashing discourse, given its hyperlink structure of connections, numerous overlapping discussion fora and cross-references and cross-fertilizations with the mass media.The web can be seen as providing an interconnected space of debate around important social issues (see the research by Rogers and Zelman, 2002). But what is the evidence of counter-discourses actively and effectively contesting dominant discourse in public spaces on and offline? This is a very complex question, requiring extensive research.As a starting point, a few areas that clearly need to be focused upon will be outlined. Sunstein (2001) sees the lack of 'general interest intermediaries' or 'deliberative domains' as a central reason for fragmentation online. He believes that national newspapers and broadcasters have worked as such 'intermediaries' in the past by drawing the citizens of nation-states into shared communicative spaces. He promotes the

development of these 'intermediaries' online in order to support the meeting of difference and the development of shared public meanings which can stabilize society. Can such online sites act as useful central public arenas or 'general interest intermediaries' for information and debate, bringing discourses (not just individuals) together into contestation? In reply to this question, we can begin by considering the effectiveness of the mass media as 'general interest intermediaries'. Certainly, bringing difference together through the mass media may promote social stability. However, these media support social stability not because they provide for democratic debate but because, as shown by decades of critical media research, they draw societal voices into largely homogeneous communicative spaces bound by dominant discourse. Critical political economy research indicates that this situation is being reproduced online.As offline,'mainstream' online discursive terrain is being structured by corporate portal and media sites promoting consumer discourse, with debate largely confined within the boundaries of market-capitalist assumptions with limited opportunities for discursive contestation (Dahlberg, 2005b). Subjects are constituted as passive, individualized consumers, focused on individual pleasure maximization (Noveck, 2000).The result is a combination of extreme fragmentation and homogenisation, participants framed as individualized consumers.While online general interest intermediaries may allow for greater deliberation than the offline mass media, generally they are structured by and reinforce dominant systems of meaning and power.The 'general interest' is discursively bound by dominant understandings and represents powerful interests while obscuring this particularity and associated exclusions. Further in-depth research of these corporate portal and media sites is needed to gain a clearer understanding of the extent to which excluded voices may be 'entering' these spaces and effectively challenging the terms of debate. What about the so-called 'independent' democratic online initiatives that aim to encourage open debate online? Are they successful at bringing about the clash of discourse and subsequently a destabilization of discursive boundaries? Here we can think of projects such as Minnesota e-Democracy (www.e-democracy. org) and openDemocracy (www.opendemocracy.net/home in the UK), which in different ways attempt to facilitate online debate between diverse voices. While these initiatives may explicitly encourage the clash of position, any attempt to support democratic engagement requires drawing a boundary around legitimate ('reasonable') discursive practice. For example, in order to encourage participation and reasoned discussion, Minnesota e-Democracy discourages the use of 'political rhetoric' or 'ideology', structuring a rational form of deliberation through its rules, management and design (Dahlberg, 2001).This indicates that the project leans towards a rationalist, consensus-oriented deliberative model. In contrast, openDemocracy has attempted to promote agonistic debate by soliciting comment, rebuttal and replies from opposing perspectives on controversial issues.This constitutes an explicit attempt to ensure inter-discursive contestation. However, as Curran (2003) shows, openDemocracy is structured by a particular (liberal-democratic) discursive framework: an academic exchange between educated elites discussing issues largely from a liberal political position. In some cases, those holding oppositional discursive positions to the assumed liberal-democratic framework have identified this framing and subsequently been reluctant to engage in debate.9To what extent, then, do these 'independent' projects foster greater discursive contestation than media sites? Further research is needed here. However, it is clear that these spaces need to be complemented by communicative practices that facilitate more open inter-discursive

contestation. Such contestation is being fostered online through the use of cyberactivist or 'hacktivist' methods, which bring excluded discourse to attention in the 'mainstream' public sphere, methods that include email spamming, denial-ofservice attacks on internet servers, site defacements that leave behind protest messages and parody sites diverting attention to counter-discursive spaces.10 These actions enable exclusions of dominant discourse to be confronted in ways that are not ignored as easily as 'reasonable' discussion can be. Such activism is seen largely as illegitimate ('partisan' and 'unreasonable') by consensus-oriented deliberate democrats. However, given power differentials, activism plays an essential role in the public sphere for drawing attention to marginalized voices and helping to explain issues (Dahlberg, 2005a;Young, 2001). There is an increasing volume of research on cyberactivism.This research shows that a variety of marginalized individuals and groups representing counter-discourse are using various forms of radical counter-publicity to challenge the boundaries of dominant discourses and subsequently to bring excluded issues and identities into debate within the 'mainstream' public sphere (see for example, Bennett, 2003; Downing, 2001; Gallo, 2003; Jordan, 1999; Jordan and Taylor, 2004; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; Meikle, 2002; Salazar, 2003;Terranova, 2004;Van de Donk et al., 2004;Webster, 2001).This research identifies that there are extensive challenges to dominant discourse taking place online. However, what needs to be explored further is how effective these challenges are at altering the terms of dominant discourse. Is cyberactivism leading to destabilizations of the boundaries of dominant discourse, or to a hardening and non-engagement (both online and offline) with oppositional identities? The questions and areas of investigation outlined above simply provide initial directions for the research necessary to examine the way in which fragmented groups online contribute to a radical public sphere of discursive contestation. This research focus replaces the measurement of individual encounters with difference that would be required to solve the fragmentation debate between consensus-oriented deliberative democrats.The radical public sphere outlined in this article not only reorients this internet fragmentation research, but has significant implications for public sphere research and theorizing in general; for moving debate and research beyond both the consensus model of democracy and models that discard the public sphere in total, towards a more radical, contestationary understanding.This article provides one specific contribution to the conception's (re-)radicalization, which is being undertaken in a variety of ways by a range of critical theorists, including Benhabib (1996), Dryzek (2000), Mouffe (2005) and Fraser (1997).There is a need now not only for further theorization of counter-discourse and discursive contestation – including consideration of the form of inter- and intra-discursive contestation – but for the articulation of the various critical theory work being undertaken, so as to ensure that the public sphere conception is developed as far as possible in the service of radical democracy.

Notes

1 The short description of the public sphere given here is drawn from Habermas' work on the concept, spanning from The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989[1962]), through The Theory of Communicative Action (1984), to Between Facts and Norms (1996) and his most recent reflections on deliberative democracy and the public sphere (see Habermas, 2004, 2005 and 2006). For a full delineation of the normative requirements of the Habermasian public sphere see Dahlberg (2004).

2 Graham (1999: 83) goes further than some of the other commentators discussed here, asserting that the internet leads not only to 'social fragmentation' but also to 'moral fragmentation' and 'moral anarchy'.

3 I necessarily stylize the debate when clarifying the general assumptions and problems. To do so, I draw upon Sunstein's (2001, 2003) work as representative, given that it has been the central catalyst for the debate.

4 The first and third problems parallel critiques of the Habermasian public sphere developed by a range of critical feminist theorists including Fraser (1997), Mouffe (2000) and Young (1996, 2001). Reflection upon the assumptions of the fragmentation debate here provides a complement and extension to the work of these critics.

5 Critical theorist (re-)radicalizations of the public sphere include Fraser's (1997) subaltern counter-publics theory, Dryzek's (2000) use of Foucauldian discourse to theorize a deliberative public sphere as a space of contestation, and Warner's (2002) emphasis on counter-publics as cultural forms. Here I want to go beyond this critical theory tradition and draw resources from post-Marxism, which I believe answer more fully to the problems with the rationalist, consensus model.The work in this article is an early contribution to an articulation between the critical theory tradition stemming from the Frankfurt School and the critical theory tradition stemming from Gramsci and post-structuralism.

6 The logic of discursive contestation becomes normative when linked to discussion of democracy and the public sphere.This adds a normative dimension to Laclau's (2000) understanding of democratic politics: democracy involves not only the institutionalization of the hegemonic logic of discourse, of contingency, but the promotion of active counter-discursive struggle.

7 Consensus-oriented deliberation is not embraced by all deliberative theorists, particularly those such as Benhabib (1996) and Dryzek (2000), who maintain a critical theory focus. Elsewhere I have shown that, despite the interpretation of both Left critics and liberal supporters, Habermas can also be read as emphasizing contestation over consensus (Dahlberg, 2005a).

8 'Safe spaces' for counter-discourse can be understood also in terms of Fraser's (1997) and [Warner's (2002)] theorizations of 'subaltern counter-publics', and a number of internet-democracy commentators have used Fraser's and Warner's work to think through the internet in relation to radical democracy (see Downey and Fenton, 2003; Gallo, 2003). Elsewhere, I articulate the concepts of counter-discourse and counterpublic (Dahlberg, 2007). Here, for clarity, I focus on Laclau and Mouffe's work and the concept of counter-discourse.

9 Curran explains that openDemocracy: had enormous difficulty in persuading neo-liberals to engage in a debate that put corporate media power in the dock . . . For defenders of media corporate power to participate in this debate seemed to dignify it, to imply that there was a case to answer and to take seriously a view emanating from an illegitimate area – academic media studies.The reverse process happened in relation to 'antiglobalizers' . . . Here, the problem seemed to be that antiglobalizers were invited to engage in debate with international

businesspeople and bureaucrats who were liberals rather than neo-liberals.To participate meant muddying the clear waters of polarized debate and taking seriously a position that was judged to be a fig leaf. (2003: 238)

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