“Nobody Knows You’re A Dog”:
Pervasive Anonymity and the Networked Public Sphere

by

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“NOBODY KNOWS YOU’RE A DOG”:

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BY JUSTIN W. POTTLE
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: THE ANONYMOUS PUBLIC

No one knows you’re dog on the Internet. Even as more information about our activities and identities than ever finds its way into cyberspace, we, as users, can never be fully certain of who we are communicating with when we converse, comment, and debate online. At the same time, massive data trails left in our digital wake radically undermine our traditional notions of privacy, while offering businesses the ability to tailor search engine results, advertisements, and content to each unique user, drawing on the wealth of information on their past preferences. Our identity becomes quantifiable online, reducible to a series of link clicks, blog posts, and Facebook likes, and, troublingly, this objectified identity is easily accessible to those with the financial means. But for the great majority of us unable to access this sort of data, we cannot begin to know whom we are interacting with online and who is observing those interactions.

Anonymity is hardwired into the Internet. Hidden behind the Internet’s end-to-end architecture, users are invisible and anonymous to one another, and, in the absence of observable identifiers, they are free to disclose whatever information about themselves, true or false, they choose. Others can only know so much about you in an immediate experiential sense as you let on, and vice-versa. You could be wealthy or poor. You might be black, white, Asian or Latino. You might be a man, a woman, or something else entirely. You could be a dog, and no one would know unless you told them so.

This is one of the great paradoxes of the emerging online world: unprecedented surveillance and total anonymity go hand in hand. The issue of privacy online has received a great deal of scholarly attention over the past couple of decades, and for good
reason. The sudden explosion of information provided by the Internet has blurred the lines between what information is public and what is private, and a whole host of activists, corporations, and other actors exploiting this gray area for personal or populist gain throw the notions of privacy into a drastic new light. But in spite of this, the corresponding issue of anonymity has been considerably less visible in academic circles. Perhaps conventional knowledge suggests anonymity is nothing new. Poets, polemics, and partisans have long operated under the guise of anonymity or pseudonymity. From The Federalist Papers to missives scrawled on bathroom stalls, nameless publication and communication seems a natural part of social life. Even the occasional Roman stopped to pen a quick quip on the ancient walls of Pompeii. Perhaps this contributes to a sense of banality surrounding Internet anonymity, a phenomenon that is ostensibly no different from the offline namelessness that’s as old as written language itself.

But despite this seeming ordinariness, the impact of anonymity online is in fact quite profound. Communication, as we’re accustomed to understanding it, takes place face-to-face under certain assumed conditions of identifiability and visibility. Individuals see each other when they converse. They can identify whom they’re communicating with in some sense, even if they don’t formally know them or if that communication occurs through some technological medium such as the phone, radio waves, or a written letter. Interaction can occur anonymously, but non-identifiability isn’t the standard and is often quite hard to achieve when two or more individuals talk directly. Identifiability is the baseline of traditional conceptions of the sphere of communications.

The Internet changes all of that. Unlike preceding communications technologies, the Internet isn’t just a tool, it’s a mediated social network of interactions that imposes new conditions of anonymity as the rule. In the words of pioneering Internet scholar
Lawrence Lessig, “While in real space… anonymity has to be created, in cyberspace anonymity is the given” (Code 45). When assessing online communication, we cannot simply assume it to be the same as the communication we’re accustomed to at neighborhood barbecues and in most social theoretical accounts of the public sphere. Despite this, the implications of anonymity have been under-scrutinized in much of the academic debate surrounding the political potential of the Internet.

Many deliberative democratic theorists, who prioritize the role communication and public opinion in democratic institutions, have rallied around the Internet as a potential tool for the revitalization of civic conversation. Their enthusiasm is not unmerited: the advent of modern information and communications technologies has opened up a massive new stage for discussing and finding information on political and social issues of great importance. In the few short years since the popular embrace of the net¹, individuals with access to a computer have a world of goods, ideas, and communities, scattered throughout geographic space, at their fingertips. The world has not only shrunk in this sense; cyberspace stands as an entirely new platform of human action divorced from the worldly borders that defined history before it. A friend in Jakarta or Stockholm, once oceans away, is now accessible by a few clicks. Virtual libraries brimming with thousands of volumes no longer take hours of browsing and skimming to draw from—a handful of keywords in a search engine returns a wealth of specialized knowledge in a fraction of a second. Individuals once linked through social ties and chance encounters now connect around the globe through a web of wires, routers, and electrons. Simply

¹ Though they each have specific and nuanced meanings unto themselves, for the purposes of this thesis, I will uses words like “cyberspace,” “the Internet,” “information and communication technologies,” “the net,” and like phrases interchangeably. They serve as convenient shorthand for what can be aptly described as a system of globally interconnected digital networks so as to avoid confusion.
put, citizens are able to communicate with each other and inform themselves better than perhaps ever before.

Since its arrival, the Internet has torn down the barriers that in the past defined the ways individuals communicated, disseminated information, and subsequently organized themselves. By fundamentally reorganizing the conditions of communication—eliminating space and stretching time, offering greater control over experience, rendering all communicants anonymous—the Internet has shaped a new sort of public sphere, one that functions under very different assumptions than its traditional, “real life” counterpart, but inevitably coexists with it. And this networked public sphere is growing rapidly. As a result, the new conditions of communication online have come to have an increasingly real effect on political and social developments offline. This is not to say one realm is overtaking the other, that one day we’ll have so immersed ourselves in cyberspace that we’ll be forever glued to our computer screens. Rather, our experiences offline will continue to have profound effects on the ways we use the Internet, but, increasingly, the converse will be the case as well. The implications the Internet’s changing conditions of communication have for democratic political life are far-reaching but have received relatively little attention from political theorists compared to other facets of Internet life.

The goal of my thesis will be to grapple with what the new conditions of communication online hold for the possibility of a flourishing democracy based in public deliberation. I am not the first to study the Internet’s democratic potential—theorists and political scientists scrambled to analyze the effect that digital networks would have on our democracies and our role as citizens even before the arrival of the Internet as we know it now. What I seek to do, however, is to engage not only with the Internet, but
also analyze the issue of anonymity and changing conditions of the public sphere by grappling with the normative underpinnings of deliberative democracy and the fundamentals of communicative relations themselves. Such a rigorous approach allows me to clearly identify the questions I seek to answer and determine how new communications technologies affect democracy’s ability to achieve its deepest and most essential ends.

So what are these deep and essential ends? I argue that democracy doesn’t simply allow for personal political agency, but rather an agency of a collective sort, the ability to define and shape a citizenry’s moral lives and shared experiences. Discussion, in this sense, doesn’t merely promote the finding of solutions, but also fosters shared values, collective self-awareness, and mutual recognition between citizens as free and reasonable political equal that allows them to approach political issues from the perspective of the public as a whole. Communication produces common bonds, common value frameworks, and common experiences from which the full normative and communitarian content of democracy can be realized. Thus, civic life is not simply the casting of the occasional vote; it is a process of collective self-determination and moral education, an idea best represented by John Dewey’s notion of the public. The value of democracy extends beyond giving citizens the ability to choose who leads them, bestowing a community with the ability to shape the moral conditions of their communal life and regulate the governments that regulate them, all this made possible through vastly interconnected and overlapping networks of communication. This picture isn’t utopian, however. Determining a public moral framework for legitimacy inevitably excludes certain values, perspectives, and identities from the public sphere and justifies
the marginalization of citizens who diverge from the majority. Yet, a moral consciousness grounded in mutual recognition and trust mitigates these effects.

Though I’ll engage with this conception of democracy in far greater detail later on in this project, for now, this formulation suggests the central question I seek to address: if the goal of democracy is to institutionally realize a public moral consciousness developed through citizen communication, how does the Internet’s expansion of communicative opportunities and its reorientation of the conditions of that communication affect democratic communities? For almost any deliberative democratic theorist, more communication is a good thing—it allows for citizens to encounter new ideas, juxtapose their preconceived beliefs against the experiences of others, and refine their views in light of new information. But crucial to my project is the fact that communication online under new conditions of anonymity is not the same as its traditional offline counterpart.

Over the course of the following chapters, I argue that online communication has a radically different effect: the structural conditions of the Internet cause online communication to weaken the social bonds necessary to forming democracies rooted in shared understandings and normative frameworks. The new baseline conditions of communication, anonymity and invisibility, force individuals to engage with their fellows as abstractions within their own subjectivity instead of engaging them as fully free and reasonable subjects and as members of a shared moral community in their own right. This results in the reorientation of how citizens interact as individuals and how they conceive of the social context of the society they inhabit. Crucial concepts for the constitution of a vibrant public sphere—accountability, confrontation, mutual recognition, and shared understandings—are all undermined by the mechanisms of
online communication. The new networked public sphere, divorced from the mechanisms that shape civil society in real space, reveals itself to be more disjointed but more free, at once more community-oriented and ironically solipsistic. Such a public sphere simply cannot support the kind of moral community formation so necessary for flourishing deliberative democracy in part because it offers increased freedom from the mechanisms that afford the public its regulative power.

Thus, the Internet fundamentally transforms democracy in ways that undermine its the core normative aims. However, this is not to say the Internet is inherently detrimental to democracy, but that it must be properly integrated with forms of offline civic engagement in order to maximize its democratic functions.

In following pages, I will build this argument by setting out the communicative foundations of democracy by drawing on the work of thinkers from the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and political science. Democracy is uniquely dependent on its citizens, not simply as units or as a collective, but as individual moral agents capable of self-definition, and the technological conditions of societies are shaped by as well as shape that moral development. Thus, my goal is to grapple with the notion of a networked public on the level of its individual constituents and their interactions each other, beginning from the most fundamental aspects of human communication and perception and building upwards.

In Chapter II of this project, I will present the case for a networked democracy. Structured around the thought of Yonai Benkler, I will examine the main reasons theorists have offered for believing that the Internet could be a democratic tool. Essentially, they argue that the Internet massively expands human communicative possibilities, fundamentally shifting the paradigm of how we share and communicate
information. Benkler calls this a move away from an industrial information economy toward a networked alternative. The former was based upon market forces and high capital barriers, resulting in unilateral and hierarchical communication structures, but the latter is driven by collaboration and “decentralized individual action” (Benkler 3). The product, we are told, is a social structure of communication more in accordance with human freedom and democratic principle. I will present Benkler’s argument alongside other leading theories on how online networks can help promote democratic access, improve discursive quality, and states’ ability to respond to the demands of civil society. These ostensible benefits seem enticing, but the lack of specificity in these analyses about the ends of democracy undermines their value.

The task of Chapter III is to begin expanding our conception of what democracies ought to look like by introducing the idea of a public, a self-reflexive and self-determining moral community capable of generating legitimacy, a concept fundamental to deliberative democracy. Building on the work of Jürgen Habermas, I will discuss the communitarian undertones of his democratic model’s synthesis of republican and liberal theories in order to draw out the formative effect democracy has on its citizens. In the second part of this chapter, I will juxtapose Habermasian deliberative democracy with criticisms from the field of social choice theory. Defending this model from a more instrumentally rational approach to democratic theory will at once strengthen it and highlight the importance of preference formation in both social choice and deliberative models.

This leads into Chapter IV, which explores the communicative mechanisms that shape preferences, produce norms, and allow for the shared moral frameworks necessary for legitimation to arise. Communication between individual subjects is the prime means
for constituting a backdrop of shared meanings that make social life, and, by extension, democracy possible. The social philosophy of George Herbert Mead will serve as the intellectual framework for this effort. After engaging with Mead's theories, this chapter’s chief contribution will be to turn the discussion of the moral and communicative grounding of legitimacy back onto civil society itself. In a deliberative scheme dedicated to producing shared values, those values not only regulate the actions of state apparatuses, but also the nature and content of the communicative processes that occur within civil society through the generation of norms. These values constitute a form of civic moral education, but derive their regulative content from the processes of informal social control originating solely from interactions within civil society. The public, in this sense, not only determines the systems that govern it, but also the non-political elements of the lives of those citizens comprising it.

With a stronger understanding of the communicative mechanism through which a public arises, I will dive deeper into the origins of the idea of the public and its reliance, initially, on social developments and, increasingly, on technological changes. Chapter V focuses on the changing conditions of communication that allow for a public to come into being and begins my engagement with the implications those changing conditions have on democratic functioning. A theoretical history of the public and the public sphere, rooted in Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and John Dewey’s *The Public and its Problems*, highlights how the rise of a true information economy within civil society leads to the prospects of a empowered civil society and the promise of the public. Through a brief discussion the philosophy of technology, I suggest, however, that the very mechanisms that made the public possible in the first place may have a counterproductive effect as we become more reliant on mediated communication and
information gathering. Technology doesn’t just expand communication, it fundamentally reorients the conditions under which we act, and, as a result, how we experience reality.

The Internet’s profound effect on the conditions of actions merits a deeper explanation of the experience of social reality itself, the project of Chapter VI. The existence of a public requires the development of intersubjective understandings of the meanings of political concepts and actions. In this chapter, I engage directly with the constitution of meanings by introducing the concept of the lifeworld, a major idea in phenomenological and Habermasian thought. Using the work of pioneering social phenomenologist Alfred Schütz as a starting point, I will engage with the types of experience that make the intersubjectivity of a lifeworld possible. We experience our social reality directly in our spatially located face-to-face encounters with the world around us, but reckon the world outside of our direct experiences within our own minds. The public, as an abstract association we can never directly experience, is closely linked with the issue of how we deal with indirect social reality. By juxtaposing the mechanisms of understanding in directly experienced and indirectly experienced social reality, the effects of a non-spatial computer-mediated social realm, cyberspace, become clearer.

Chapter VII will establish a better understanding of what such a computer-mediated reality looks like by applying it into the Schützian paradigm. The non-visibility of online communication leads to pervasive anonymity online, radically subverting the traditional mechanisms of communication and understanding rooted in visibility and recognition. Online communication, while ostensibly directly experienced, functions under the same mechanism of subjective reckoning as indirect social reality due to this pervasive sense of anonymity. The communicative processes that occur online are certainly real, but they occur under conditions of non-visibility that cause them to be
experienced as less than fully real. Anonymity leaves a great deal up to the imagination. Our reckoning of others as independent subjects is hampered by a lack of information on the identity and accountability of those individuals, and we become more and more reliant on our own subjectively construed categories, what Weber calls ideal types, for filling in these gaps.

This dependence on individual subjectivity is the crux of my two-pronged argument in Chapter VIII. We can distinguish two levels of social relations that are affected by the changing conditions of communication posed by the Internet: the individual’s relation to one’s social context and one’s relation to other individuals. Concerning the former, in real space, visibility begets confrontation: we’re forced to see and hear things that run contrary to our comfortable assumptions, witness harsh realities, and endure unpredictable reactions from our peers when we violate their expectations. The lack of control and confrontational quality of direct experience is crucial for developing shared meanings and individual perspectives consistent with social reality, functioning much in the same way as deliberation to challenge and refine citizens’ views. The Internet changes this scheme entirely by instituting heightened capacity for control and thus new conditions of public action. Overreliance on these new conditions tends to break down the mechanisms necessary for establishing the civic bonds crucial to flourishing democracy. As for the former, online anonymity undermines our ability to hold each other accountable for our actions. As I will argue, these accountability relations function as the metaphorical glue of the public; their being weakened not only undermines social control but also the self-reflexivity of the individual’s own moral imagination. Anonymity leads to a mental state where the individual becomes disassociated from public values, often causing public deliberation to become
unconstructive. The result of this two-pronged reorientation of the networked citizen’s conception of and interactions with her peers results in a public sphere that cannot support a public in the sense necessary for collective realization through democratic politics. Instead, such a sphere polarizes communities, prevents recognition between citizens, and breaks down social trust fostered through accountability mechanisms. The very factors that make the Internet such an appealing democratic alternative medium ultimately undermine the greater normative ends democracy seeks to realize.

But the Internet does have a contribution to make to democracy. Although online communication or a society entirely structured around it cannot support the necessary social bonds and public spaces necessary for the realization of a public, the web’s potential as a democratic complement is huge. In the conclusion of this project, I will approach how we might be able to harness the transformative communicative capacities of the Internet in a way conducive fostering to stronger public relations. The Internet by itself tends to isolate and polarize individuals, as well as make them less trustworthy to others they deliberate with, but reengagement with civil society in real space can help networked civil society flourish. Democratic life has an important and valuable place in cyberspace, but if that online experience comes at the expense of engagement as a public, it threatens to hollow and fracture democracies.

In this project, I hope to make a small, but important contribution to democratic theory in the digital age. With the great number of communicative possibilities provided by new technologies, the effects and problems of increasingly networked public life are becoming more and more salient. The traditions of philosophy prizing communication and its role in social and political life are more pertinent now than perhaps any time since the rise of the modern mass media in the mid-20th century, and their reentrance into the
theoretical dialogue over the Internet is long overdue. The Internet is fundamentally changing our economy, our social interactions, and our political endeavors. Understanding how technologies shape society and its members is but the first step in making technology serve democratic values and the collective life citizens wish to live together.
CHAPTER II
NET GAINS: THE PROMISE OF INTERNET DEMOCRACY

i. Toward a Networked Information Economy

In 2009, Brooklyn-based developer Casey Pugh began a novel and altogether unprecedented project: to recreate Star Wars: A New Hope shot-for-shot in its entirety by recreating 15-second chunks of the film and stitching them back together. But this wasn’t a one-man job. Tapping into an international community of amateur filmmakers and Star Wars enthusiasts, Pugh asked Internet users to film, record, and animate a brief segment of the seminal film. The result was Star Wars: Uncut, a two-hour mash of green-screened sci-fi, pop-culture nostalgia, and crowd-sourced surrealism. The film required only boundless energy and whole lot of people. For Pugh, the Internet provided both. His creative and innovative exploit netted him an Emmy in 2010, several million views on YouTube, and a powerful example of the collective power of Internet communities.

A few years prior, political consultant Joe Trippi landed a spot managing the 2004 presidential campaign of a fiery liberal doctor from Vermont, then-Governor Howard Dean. Dean was a long shot from the start, and his pedigree looked like something out of the West Wing, too unlikely to exist anywhere but television. Heavyweight primary opponents, underfinancing, and little to no name recognition added up to what seemed like a comically Sisyphean race. But Trippi didn’t want to play by the traditional rules of campaigning—“From that first day in Burlington,” he writes, “I had gone out with one message: Internet, Internet, Internet” (100). The unlikely Dean campaign waded into the largely uncharted waters of political cyberspace and early blog culture, and emerged as a frontrunner in 2003. Though Dean’s campaign would implode
in 2004, some have gone as far to call Dean’s strategy and his Blog for America as the “turning point” for the nascent blogosphere (Lim and Kann 93).

These two projects—improbable at their time, impossible only a decade before—offer a brief glimpse at just what makes the Internet so extraordinary as a means of communication. A sudden expansion in the capacity for “many-to-many” and “one-to-many” communication has radically altered the way societies and their constituents produce and exchange information. Connecting individuals across vast geographical and individual boundaries, the Internet and similar emerging communications technologies show immense potential for revitalizing the public sphere and democratic forms of governance. Scholars from a wide variety of fields have argued that such technologies, by promoting unfettered discussion about political issues and the sharing of information on a massive scale, can greatly expand both the arena of political communicative relations and the scope of the individual and collective viewpoints and identities that are expressed and integrated there. Speaking of “The Internet Revolution” seems trite and naive in 2013. However, for many political and media scholars, including Harvard’s Yochai Benkler, “It should not be” considered so (1).

Why? It’s rare to hear scholars speak of a “radio revolution” or a “telephone revolution”—if anything, they sound clunky and laden with superlative. Like any communicative technology, the Internet reorganizes social relations in that it changes the conditions under which individuals may communicate. The printing press, bureaucratizing of mail systems, the radio and television all did this, but, as Benkler argues, all fit into a particular information economy, one that, since the nineteenth century, required “ever-larger investments of physical capital” to communicate across increasingly large and interconnected political, social, and economic communities (3).
The discourse of Internet advocates suggests a distinct spatial dimension to the nature of communication economies, if not communication itself. We take for granted a world, both on the scale of individual political actors and of state units, in which physical space defines what can and can’t be done, what rights and obligations are held, and our habits and behaviors (Johnson and Post 1368-1369).

The Internet, we might think, offers a radical challenge to a distinctly spatial information economy, one where transporting X message to Y individual requires a whole lot of walking, a horse or a car or a plane, or even a vast global spider web of cables and wires. Yet, while online networks certainly exist physically as routers, servers, wires, and screens, the rapidly declining price of computation and data storage mean that the capital necessary to disperse information and produce and share cultural products is significantly less online, making such networks more accessible to a wider range of people than traditional media technologies. Increasing availability is coupled with the structural facets of the Internet itself, so that the user’s communicative possibilities, while physically facilitated, now traverse vast geographical boundaries and spaces. Even more potently, “The Net enables transactions between people who do not know, and in many cases cannot know, the physical location of the other party” (Johnson and Post 1371). Location certainly matters in a formal sense—networked computers register physical location through IP addresses, available to the determined user or monitor. However, such addresses are merely logical abstractions of actual place. The similarly determined user can alter her IP address to appear to access networks from an entirely different geographic place. By nature of the Internet’s architecture and technical structure, virtual location need not correspond with actual location.
There is reason to believe, then, that non-media and non-market actors and processes play a greater role in information production than before, expanding collaborative possibilities in information production. Thus, the suggestion that we’re moving away from an industrial or spatial information economy toward something new is quite compelling. Massive peer-production projects offer a new look into the age of Internet communication.

Take Wikipedia, the web’s peer-produced answer to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Though the bane of many print-inclined high-school teachers, Wikipedia is gaining ground in terms of legitimacy. A study by *Nature* in 2005 (only four years after Wikipedia’s founding in 2001) comparing 42 scientific entries in the online encyclopedia and the *Britannica* found the differences in accuracy to be relatively minor. Though high-profile errors had set back Wikipedia’s reputation, *Nature* revealed that in their 42 samples, *Britannica* had an average of three inaccuracies per article, while Wikipedia articles had four (Giles 900-901).

For Internet boosters, the findings were cause for celebration—not only was information more readily accessible than ever, online peer-production and peer-review seemed to produce close to the same results as traditional elite controlled production. Benkler’s sphere of non-market information-production relations continues to outpace its market-based competitors: in terms of total Internet traffic ranked by Alexa Internet as of early 2013, free-to-use social networks, picture and video sharing sites, and travel and restaurant review platforms far out-paced their counterparts that used paywalls or market-driven content (“Top 500”). More and more, the most prominent aspects of the web appear to be defined by collective and collaborative action, information dispersion and many-to-many communication facilitated by the collective action of numerous
individuals. The collective action problem of why I would contribute to any intellectual commons I could access for free, something seemingly impossible in “real space,” has resolved itself in cyberspace, resulting in an information economy that is rapidly changing to something more complex and egalitarian.

This egalitarianism and interconnectivity has long been a hallmark of arguments for democratic applicability of the web. Even during the earliest days of the Internet, the web has relied on an end-to-end architecture, that is, communication between end hosts of a network without mediation by intermediary protocols, setting the framework for more sophisticated peer-to-peer and many-to-many forms of distribution (Ito 7). The sudden overcoming of the traditional boundaries of communication (spatiality and the reproduction of physical media—pages, tapes, cassettes) led to an intellectual effervescence surrounding new network technologies. Libertarian-minded thinkers heralded cyberspace as “the new home of Mind,” latching on to the seemingly metaphysical separateness of the networked world from the real one (Barlow 28). Early debates attempted to understand the spatiality of cyberspace—whether to locate cyberspace within real space, to see one as independent of the other, or something of both—and thus its relation to traditional legal structures. While the view that the Internet is somehow transcendentally independent from traditional legal structures has faded among legal scholars since the early 1990s, the moral claim that “the Net represents a fundamental enhancement of human freedom, with a transforming potential that is worth defending,” remains strong among Internet boosters (Brin 32). Such is the underlying normative content of Benkler’s envisioned shift toward a networked information economy:
“Decentralized individual action—specifically, new and important cooperative and coordinated action carried out through radically distributed, nonmarket mechanisms” as opposed to communicative strategies necessarily rooted into traditional market and property relations, are playing a consistently larger role in public communication, and that development ought to be lauded.” (Benkler 3)

Well and good. But fundamental changes in the nature of society’s communicative sphere do not simply happen in a vacuum. These shifts necessarily have important ramifications for economic organization, social capital, and perhaps most pressingly in advanced democracies, political institutions. In a deliberative democratic scheme, which prioritizes and seeks to empower informed discourse and public opinion in political decision-making, changes in the nature of an information economy are crucial. By altering who communicates and the means and conditions of their communication, the communicative community that comprises a democratic polis becomes something fundamentally different. As the Internet evolves toward an increasingly networked, non-market information economy, what of democracy?

Political scientists and technologists of all stripes have attempted to tackle this question using a wide variety of methods, with an emerging consensus among empiricists and theorists alike that the Internet has had and will continue to have an impressive impact on democratic functions. Internet freedom advocacy organization Personal Democracy asserts that “Networked voices are reviving the civic conversation” (“Manifesto”), but is such a statement right? Internet boosters see web technologies as providing a variety of benefits, the majority of which may be classified along three dimensions: expansion of an individual’s communicative possibilities (opportunities to
both send and receive information), enhanced quality and conditions of those possibilities, and increased ability to put discursively-formed opinion into practice. More simply, we might think of these as enhancing the access to, content, and practicability of political deliberation.

These together have led some to suggest that this networked information economy represents the emergence of Ivan Illich’s idea of a convivial politics, one fully realizing individual freedom and autonomy, maximizing expression, imagination, and creativity instead of output. The shift toward egalitarian and collaborative delivery platforms subverts the traditional dichotomy of producer and consumer by offering every consumer the opportunity to produce as well. Considering the opportunity for peer-to-peer and many-to-many exchanges, high accessibility, and a general resistance to market control, the Internet “is a convivial medium with a greater scope for freedom, autonomy, creativity, and collaboration than previous media” (Lim and Kann 82). In Benkler’s words, communicative technologies offer the “freedom to do more for oneself, by oneself, with others” (134).

**ii. Access Accessibility: New Communicators, New Communication**

Key to democracy is information—about issues, persons, and news from around a nation-state and around the globe. Thus the massive expansion of opportunities to share information directly and indirectly created by the Internet seems tailor-made for a communication-contingent democracy. Communicative possibilities are essential for democratic functioning. Thus, we have two strands to tease out of the claim that the Internet expands communicative possibilities: that we can speak and listen more. With the Internet, new forums and connectivity allow us to communicate and to be
communicated with more, to find new audience for our creations and expressions and to encounter those of a whole new range of others. This distinction may help us build a more cogent argument, since any increase in either the ability to “speak” to and “listen” to more people expands communicative possibilities, albeit by different mechanisms.

Supporters and detractors of the Internet’s political potential tend more or less unanimously to accept that the web has widely expanded the amount of information available to the average person, perhaps to the point of “an omnipresent risk of information overload” (Sunstein 51). Access to reasonably good information is crucial for “refined” public opinion, in contrast to its “raw,” uninformed, and uncontested counterpart (Fishkin and Luskin 7). Thus, a networked information economy driven by diffused individual delivery of information appears to augment public opinion. Prior to the Internet, individuals had newspapers, local libraries, television and so on to inform them, but they had little ability to control the information relayed directly to them and the costs of discovering information on their own were high. Information was distributed through specific channels generally controlled by a small number of market-oriented actors or the state (in case of public libraries) or distributed by a very small number of individuals to a similarly small number of individuals. The distribution of information was time and capital intensive, and individuals’ ability to find information on the subjects of interest to them was severely limited.

The Internet and its emerging networked information economy not only affords individuals instantaneous access to a large number of sources, but has drastically increased the variety of those sources, hosting mainstream media outlets, blogs, social networks, government departments, academic work, and so on (Benkler 162). Not only can I access my local newspaper with a single click, I can access the nearest major
metropolitan daily, a national magazine, or sources from far, far away. Every individual, corporation, and organization has the opportunity to be a storyteller online, and, most often, whoever wishes to listen can do so. Empirical studies suggest that individuals who tap into this wealth of information are more engaged and vote more often; Internet news consumers are more likely to vote and hold political conversations and are more knowledgeable about campaigns than their traditional media consuming counterparts (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 845-85). On a related note, this massive expansion of the individual’s ability to access information often means a greater amount of information available about the government under which that individual lives, often posted directly from that government itself. In advanced democracies, government departments, documents, proceedings, and auxiliary information about other countries and their administrations are often easily accessible, promoting greater awareness of governmental actions and thus enabling citizens to hold political institutions more accountable (Gimmler 32).

For democratic theorists, the importance of the availability of information is matched only by the enhanced ability to communicate. The nature of Benkler’s networked information economy is contingent upon communication and collaboration. As discussed, the Internet facilitates forms of many-to-many communication more or less impossible in real space. A real space moderated discussion among the readers and producers of The New York Times would require the time and energy to get each individual into the same space, a near impossible feat, but the Internet’s ability to overcome vast geographic distances and to change the role of time in communication allows discourses among geographically separated people to take place over extended periods of time. Asynchronicity is the key for managing these large-scale, many-to-many
interactions. On the comments section of an article, all readers can theoretically converse with each other, engage in back-and-forth discussion, address new points or observations, debate with content creators and so on. Removing or at least lessening the constraints of place and time from conversation makes possible fundamentally new forms of communication (Bohman 132-134). Combined with end-to-end architecture, these expansions of the natural limitations on communication allow for networks to facilitate “bottom-up, top-down, and side-to-side” exchanges (Dahlgren 150). The dichotomy between content generator and consumer so prevalent in traditional forms of media also breaks down, as generators consume and consumers generate. Increased public dialogue and the breaking down of the expert-public barriers raised so high by the mainstream media allow for greater integration of ordinary experiences into public opinion on policy decisions (Coleman and Gotze 12). This, Bohman suggests, “holds out the promise of capturing the features of dialogue and communication more robustly than the print media” (133).

Recent developments throughout the world, especially in developing or authoritarian countries, back this observation up. For example, in 2009 Twitter listed the heavily contested Iranian presidential elections were listed as the number one news story of the year. “When protests started to escalate, and the Iranian government moved to suppress dissent both on- and off-line, the Twitterverse exploded with tweets from people who weren’t having it,” reported Time magazine. “While the front pages of Iranian newspapers were full of blank space where censors had whited out news stories, Twitter was delivering information from the street level, in real time” (Grossman). Social media platforms had a similarly transformative effect on the Arab Spring a year later, helping to facilitate widespread anti-government demonstrations and keeping the world
updated from the ground up. Perhaps the best coverage of the protests came from the protesters themselves. Social media, particularly collaborative and communication-oriented developments online, helped facilitate a new means of mobilization and a new kind of reporting on these events, reflecting the breakdown of traditional divides between information reporter and information consumer.

Of course, this sudden information explosion is a double-edged sword. With so many speakers, who can be heard? This is the “Babel” objection to the democratic potential of the Internet: its chaos either results in the impossibility of meaningful online discourse or the reemergence of money and capital as the determinants of who is heard and who isn’t. More sophisticated versions of the Babel objection argue that in spite of the fact that the Internet is home to a massive number of speakers, they enjoy only a tiny fraction of listeners. A disproportionate share of the online audience attends only to a handful of pre-established, high profile and well-bankrolled actors. Matthew Hindman argues, “if we look at citizens’ voices in terms of the readership their postings receive, political expression online is orders of magnitude more unequal than the disparities we are used to in voting, volunteer work, even political fundraising” (17). People are listened to online, but only in such a way that undermines the very egalitarian democratic promise of the web.

Benkler responds to the Babel argument by comparing the architecture of traditional mass media to that of the Internet. Mass media combines particular technological capabilities (the radio, the television, the press) with a market-oriented cost structure and a distinctly commodified media culture, resulting in a “relatively controlled public sphere.” The technical architecture of this model takes the form of a “spoke-and-hub structure,” with the central source communicating unilaterally with many end
receivers. Communication back is relegated to phones, local one-to-one media, or just plain old conversation (Benkler 179).

Online, however, even the highest-profile information sources must play by different rules. Dissemination and response channels are often combined, allowing for the comingling of media content and user voices. But the key to resolving the Babel argument lies in how these user voices create and promote information through sharing and social networks. Benkler suggests that a sort of natural order is emerging online, one that is neither too concentrated nor too chaotic. Cyberspace is not a freewheeling “home of the Mind” or a rehashing of the mass media market model. And while there certainly is a lot of noise and clutter online, order manages to emerge. Benkler writes, “Filtering, accreditation, synthesis, and salience are created through a system of peer review by information affinity groups, topical or interested based” (242). While a select handful of traditional media outlets may dominate readership on online, a vast array of moderately read sites form clusters where voices often marginalized or ignored by the mainstream media gain a platform. These interest communities filter a huge quantity of opinions and expressions, and promote the best among themselves and transmit them to broader groups, which, in turn, transmit them to even broader groups, a process occurring entirely outside market systems and incentives. Bloggers who write about the New York Knicks link to other bloggers writing about the New York Knicks. People interested in animal rights link to other people interested in animal rights. Significant observations make their way to more visible platforms within or outside of the interest community. Ideas go “viral,” travelling with surprising speed through social networks. Essentially, order comes out of cohesive groups forming together on the basis of shared interest and offering peer-review type processes that allow important citizen voices to emerge from
the din of cyberspace, to gain attention outside their niche, and enter into public discourse (13).

Communities of interest may crystallize into any number of forums or message boards that function as localized, specified public spaces that filter and disseminate ideas to other groups. These communicative spaces allow for a more direct form of “peer-review” than that which occurs naturally, if spontaneously, in Benkler’s interest clusters. Such groups offer deliberative spaces for news and voices on specialized issues considered too small to merit coverage from larger organizations. The oft-cited Minnesota E-Democracy group is an early and prime example. Founded in 1994 as an online forum for the discussion of political issues surrounding Minnesota gubernatorial elections, E-Democracy bills itself as the first “election information website” and focuses on “Harness[ing] the power of online tools to support participation in public life, strengthen communities, and build democracy” (“Mission and Goals”). The website initially allowed Minnesota citizens to express opinions, ask questions, and make proposals via email or mailing list in the four weeks prior to elections, and have their submissions posted on the website. Citizens could access smaller moderated forums, often based at the neighborhood level, to discuss submissions in depth. Organized entirely by non-market forces, E-Democracy seeks to provide an “interactive public commons to discuss and follow Minnesota politics” (Gimmler 32). Now counting 20,000 regularly contributing members worldwide, and serving multiple states and three countries (the US, UK, and New Zealand), E-Democracy continues to serve as a sort of self-policing deliberative sphere within the chaos of Internet communication. Participants name themselves and follow certain conventions of civility (no name calling, daily posting limits, certain forbidden content) (“Rules”).
The E-Democracy project reflects the materialization of interest communities in a way that’s less spontaneous than Benkler’s vision of an entirely decentralized realm of interpersonal interaction. Yet, it highlights an essential aspect of his proposed network information economy, and how the Babel objection can be overcome through the development and organization of small self-moderating groups that filter information and bring relevant voices together. Online communicators don’t just intermingle in one massive, incoherent pool. Instead, they cluster with others who share their interests or experiences and form formal and informal communities of speakers and listeners. As seen with E-Democracy, such groups can peer-produce governance to help organize themselves, filter through the information they seek, and promote certain forms of conduct (Johnson, Crawford, and Palfrey), thus allowing marginalized or ignored voices to reach those information hubs that garner the most online readership. This process of spontaneous organization helps combat the fears of information overload or market domination that preoccupy the minds of many thinkers concerned with cyberspace.

By connecting individuals across vast geographical boundaries, the Internet and similar emerging communications technologies show great potential for deliberative democracy in that they expand the communicative possibilities available to the ordinary individual. The expansion is, as we’ve noted, twofold, moving toward an entirely novel way of sharing and spread information. And while such a networked information economy is fundamentally tied to an industrial information economy and the market forces that drive it, informal means of filtering, accreditation, and sharing through communities of interest allow for distinctly non-market forms of production and dissemination to take root.
However, although communicative opportunities are certainly essential to democracy, the benefit of the quantity of communication opportunities also depends on the ability of citizen discourse to refine the content of these communications. Ideally, if more individuals listen to and challenge the ideas of others and hold their own opinions up to public scrutiny, their views will be enhanced in their rigor, content, and publicness. By promoting such discussion about political issues and the sharing of information on a massive scale, these new technologies can greatly expand both the arena of social and political communicative relations. But such is an incomplete assessment. We must engage directly with how they affect the scope and quality of the individual and collective viewpoints and identities that are expressed and integrated in discussions among citizens.

iii. High Tech, High Quality: Can the Internet Elevate Deliberation?

Democratic thinkers and communications theorists aren’t concerned only with the quantity of communication, but also its quality. For the Internet to be a truly democratizing tool, it must elevate discourse or at least leave its quality unchanged. If communications technologies damage the quality of discourse, the communicative possibilities they promote lose their crucial democratic content and we as citizens of democracies are left worse off. Long before the rise of modern communications technology, 18th century theologian Joseph Priestley stated that “the more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate.” Does Priestley’s maxim ring true in the digital age?

Ever optimistic, pro-Internet theorists reject this damning indictment, arguing that the Internet promotes a freer, more open discursive sphere, one that obviates the traditional shortcomings of face-to-face interaction. In this section I will not critically
assess these claims, but will set out the reasons some scholars believe that the Internet bolsters the democratic value of discourse. Their arguments are certainly not without merit.

As Habermas argues, the public sphere must be constituted by individuals “whose abstract universality afford[s] the sole guarantee that the individuals subsumed under it in an equally abstract fashion, as ‘common human beings,’ [are] set free in their subjectivity precisely by this parity” (*Structural Transformation* 54). The individuals who comprise the public sphere must be equal. When power imbalances cause one individual’s perspective to take precedence over another’s, the moral content of the public sphere and the democracy predicated upon it disappear entirely. Thus, a true Habermasian public sphere is universally accessible by politically equal individuals—“a public sphere from which specific groups were *eo ipso* excluded [is] less than merely incomplete, it [is] not a public sphere at all” (85).

To some, this last claim may prove somewhat problematic in that the digital public sphere is only accessible through a purchasable machine, creating a high cost barrier to entrance. We may suspend such an objection by noting that [1] no individual is prevented from purchasing a computer: while they may not be able to afford access, they could be provided it and are not inherently barred from access. Several scholars and policymakers have argued for a right to Internet access, and six countries² have ratified legislation protecting and working toward such a civil right. Similarly, [2] a looser conception of the digital public sphere would suggest that, because the individuals who discuss political issues in cyberspace are no different from those who discuss such issues at dinner parties and town hall meetings, there is no hard and fast separation of the

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² Costa Rica, France, Spain, Estonia, Finland, and Greece have all taken such steps.
digital public sphere from one based in real space. Information traverses the digital
divide, and someone without Internet access may very well benefit from knowledge
gained there so long as it is communicated to them by someone else.

Yet, Habermas’ major work on the origins of a realm of deliberation, *The Structural
Transformation of the Public Sphere*, is not only a celebration of the coffeehouses, salons, and
town squares of the Enlightenment, but also a eulogy. Rapidly expanding territory and
populations made the small, personal public sphere that characterized the Enlightenment
near impossible, and, coupled with the rise of more powerful communicative technology,
a social space dominated by mass media replaced the late 18th century public sphere. The
power and market dynamics of Benkler’s industrial information economy sounded the
death knell of the bourgeois public sphere by upsetting the very equality of voice (among
the bourgeois class) that gave the public sphere its moral content. However, some
suggest that the Internet, by gradually dissolving the dichotomy between journalist and
non-journalist, heralds the return of something more resembling the equality of
Habermas’ bourgeois sphere, but on a more universal scale. A study by Harvard’s
Berkman Center for Internet and Society argues that “Cyberspace… naturally supports
another feature that is highly desirable for deliberative discourse: equality among the
participants, including especially an equal ability to disseminate information to contribute
to reasoned decision-making” (“Online Deliberative Discourse”). Individuals have an
equal ability to generate content.

But even beyond this functional sense of equality, scholars argue that the
anonymity of online discourse promotes civic equality by rendering individual
unidentifiable, and, as a result, exempt from being marginalized by others. When I walk
to the library or to grab a cup of coffee, others see me and I see others. Onlookers can
see what I look like, how I carry myself, and other physical characteristics. Philosopher Helen Nissenbaum describes these observations as “opaque identifiers.” In her words, “an opaque identifier is a sign linking reliably to a person—chosen, assigned, or arising naturally—that, on the face of it, carries no information about the person. That is, the identifier holds no clue, by itself, as to the real identity of the person or how to reach that person” (“Anonymity” 143). Nonetheless, such identifiers convey information about the person’s social status, background, and other significant characteristics of social role and identity. Key to such identifiers, the sensory information I collect about a person, is the essential role they play in defining my behavior and the way I interact with specific individuals, and those individuals with me. I may avoid engaging with a stumbling drunk man, return a smile to a passerby, or treat a woman in uniform with extra respect. If I wear a suit and tie, I can expect individuals to react differently to me than they would if I looked like I slept on a park bench the night before. This latent quality of seeing and being seen, the passive collection of identifiers, is a fundamental part of real space and, subsequently, communication and behavior—visual cues that allow me to determine the consequences of this or that action, and will necessarily affect my behavior. However, while this sensory information is crucial for establishing and enforcing socially stabilizing norms based in a public moral consciousness, as I will later discuss, it can allow preconceived biases to undermine the very egalitarianism that defines the public sphere. Individuals may choose to surround themselves with people of their own race, gender, age, affinity, and so on, an isolating tendency harmful to the civic bonds of abstract egalitarianism necessary to discursively-grounded democracy. My views may be received in different ways by different individuals depending on whether I am black or white, a man or a woman, and so on, again damaging the equality of validity of opinion necessary
to the Habermasian model. When individuals are easily identifiable by certain traits, they are inevitably treated unequally.

The Internet, however, provides a sense of anonymity defined by Nissenbaum as “breaking systems of... identifiers” (143). By rendering all individual users anonymous and invisible and giving individuals the power to choose whether and in what ways to disclose normally visible identifiers, scholars argue that the Internet prevents the collection of sensory, behavior-altering information that often causes agents to act upon preconceived bias. As a result, online communities are often more heterogeneous than those found in real space in terms of age, race, and gender, and studies suggest women are less likely to be interrupted in online discussion than in face-to-face communication, where their genders are fully disclosed (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 52; Putnam, Bowling 173). Along these lines, social psychologists have noted that anonymous participants in chat rooms and other communicative places online see each other as more familiar than visually identifiable strangers, and, as a result, as more friendly and trustworthy as well. Exchanges begin more quickly and are more straightforward under such conditions (Peris et al. 44). The Internet, by removing visibility from the equation, the argument goes, produces a more equitable and open civic conversation.

Some argue that this structurally ingrained anonymity (or sense of anonymity, as I will explain later) not only blocks forms of visual or sensory discrimination in public discourse, but also promotes an even greater sense of openness by removing individuals from a social context that can be restrictive and daunting. In this way Internet anonymity is similar to the secret ballot, which was vital to the growth of democracy in the 19th century. As early as 1838, British Chartists argued that “suffrage, to be exempt from the corruption of the wealthy and the violence of the powerful, must be secret” in their first
petition to Parliament (“Chartist Petition” 702). The Chartists decried the possibility of physical and economic retribution against an individual for voting a certain way—the threat of force or dismissal from work could (and often did) compromise rule of the people. The only way to assure an individual’s ability to vote freely, fairly, and uncompromised by the intimidation of others was to assure that they were not identifiable and thus could not be targeted. By removing the threat via anonymity, freedom to vote could be more fully protected.

Nissenbaum reiterates this, suggesting that we deem anonymity legitimate when it “offers a safe way for people to act, transact, and participate without accountability, without others ‘getting at’ them, tracking them down, or even punishing them” (“Anonymity” 142). Thus, the Internet, by hiding visible identifiers, removes or greatly diminishes the possibility of corporeal identifiability and, by extension, the possibility of sanctions. In the words of the Berkman Center, “[informal] Coercive power over the body of a participant, the ultimate if often unspoken tool of offline governance, does not exist over the incorporeal citizens of online communities” (“Online Deliberative Discourse”). The chartist goal of a democratic process free from the specter of sanctions seems better realized.

By removing visible identifiers, under conditions of complete anonymity, individuals need not identify themselves and can avoid the personal accountability that often induces people to restrict their expression out of fear of reprisal. This, in some ways, is the great equalizing tendency of online communication, relegating all individuals to a sort of invisible status where they are not aware of the identity, identifiers, or even number of the individuals who see and listen to them. The result, Nissenbaum argues, is
a powerful extension of individual agency and expression necessary for deliberative democracy:

Anonymity may encourage freedom of thought and expression by promising a possibility to express opinions, and develop arguments, about positions that for fear of reprisal or ridicule they would not or dare not do otherwise. Anonymity may enable people to reach out for help, especially for socially stigmatized problems like domestic violence, fear of HIV or other sexually transmitted infection, emotional problems, suicidal thoughts. It offers the possibility of a protective cloak for children, enabling them to engage in internet communication without fear of social predation or—perhaps less ominous but nevertheless unwanted—overtures from commercial marketers. Anonymity may also provide respite to adults from commercial and other solicitations. It supports socially valuable institutions like peer review, whistle-blowing and voting.

(Nissenbaum, “Anonymity” 142)

While Nissenbaum and the Berkman Center’s analysis of anonymity paints a promising picture, it assumes no difference in anonymous and identifiable behavior, and, as a result, glosses over any potential costs that may come with anonymity. Thinkers as early as Socrates have debated the behavioral implications of anonymity and invisibility, and visible identifiers do play an essential role in our social context. Can a Habermasian public sphere actually exist under the conditions of anonymity and invisibility so lauded by some thinkers? This question is at the heart of this project, and I will return to in the second half of my thesis.
iv. Putting Together the Pieces: Democracy in Practice

The strengthening of citizens’ ability to communicate with one another and enhancement the content of their communications are all well and good, but deliberative democracy also hinges on praxis, transferring discursively generated public opinion into actual policy. Thus, the importance of any technological facilitator of democratic discourse rests upon its ability to make a democracy more responsive (or, at the very least, make it no less responsive) to the citizenry. If the Internet allowed for freer, more open, and less biased discourse and more of it, but people were so engrossed in using it that they didn’t vote, the effect, of course, would be counterproductive to democracy. However, many pro-Internet voices suggest the exact opposite is the case. Web users are in fact more politically active, more likely to vote and make their views known through activism and protest. Also of note, politicians and representatives are increasingly using the Internet to listen more closely to their constituents. From this, we can identify two primary levels of government-citizen interaction that facilitate the praxis necessary for deliberation to produce deliberative democracy: the selection of representatives and greater political responsiveness.

Measuring the effects of any form of communicative technology on voter participation is a difficult task. Education, income, race, ethnicity, age, gender, media consumption and a wide variety of attitudinal and political factors affect how likely a person is to vote (Tolbert and McNeal 175). Isolating the effect of any communicative technology from these myriad factors is a tall enough task on its own. Compounding these difficulties is the fact that many of these factors also play decisive role in determining whether or not an individual uses the Internet as well—the two largest determinants of voting, education and income, are also major factors in determining
Internet use (Martin and Robinson 2). Demographics from the Pew Center suggest 97% of individuals making more than $75,000 a year and 96% of college graduates use the Internet, while only 68% those making under $30,000 and a mere 47% of those without a high school diploma use such information technologies (Pew Internet).

Despite the large degree of ambiguity present in the data, many reports, controlling for the above factors, see the Internet as having a positive effect on political participation. A pair of studies by Caroline Tolbert and Ramona McNeal report significant increases in reported voting among Internet users: the first study acknowledged that, controlling for race, gender socioeconomic status, age, traditional media use, and a variety of political and state factors, Tolbert and McNeal find that during the 1996 and 2000 elections, Internet users had a 7% and 12%, respectively, greater probability of voting than their non-networked peers. The 1998 midterms did not hold with this trend, a finding consistent with prior studies (Bimber, “Information and Political Engagement”), suggesting even the Internet couldn’t overcome low public interest in significantly lower profile elections during the midterms (Tolbert and McNeal 179-183). A second study by McNeal and Tolbert, along with Karen Mossberger, observed similar increases in the probability of voting in the 2004 elections, this time also analyzing the specific impact of email, chat room, and online news use on voting. Chat room participation was an especially high indicator of voting, with a probability increase of between 21% and 39% (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 83-92).

However, these findings, while promising, are riddled with analytical problems. Even those scholars holding positive views of the Internet’s effects on political engagement, participation, and voting do not necessarily agree with one another—participation writ large may increase, but who is participating more? Voting is related to
socioeconomic position, as is Internet use, so this question is particularly salient. Most analyses controlling for socioeconomic factors agree on the centrality of pre-existing interest in politics in determining how the Internet affects participation, but disagree who exactly is affected—the enthusiasts or the apathetic.

One camp argues that the easy and speedy accessibility of online political information offers greater opportunity for engagement to individuals already interested in politics and serves to engage them more (Bimber, “Citizen Communication;” Weber, Loumakis, and Berman). These empirical and theoretical studies reflect the idea of a “virtuous circle” of political communication: individuals consume more of the media they are interested in (football fans watch football, Wall Street bankers read the business section), and repeated exposure to certain media creates interest. In this sense, political media (the Internet included) serve to “activate the active” (Norris 9). Political junkies use the Internet to sign and circulate petitions, organize events and protests, and continue to inform themselves, but such media technologies offer little to engage the disengaged—“the gladiators now have yet another platform for political involvement and influence” (Jensen Oates, Owen, and Gibson 54). This vision, while not perfectly utopian, certainly benefits democratic processes.

Others, however, hold the rosier view that the Internet can motivate normally disengaged or disinclined groups to take on a greater civic and political role (Barber; Delli Carpini; Milner). The ease of access and convenience provided by the Internet lowers two significant barriers to political interest in real space, these individuals suggest. Knowledge deficiencies as a reason for disengagement are more easily remedied. New

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3 This tendency to seek out information on issues and subjects we are already presupposed to, while offered in a reasonably positive light here, has significant consequences for public-minded democracies. I will return to this issue in Chapter VIII.
and more convenient communicative possibilities could draw in those disillusioned with traditional forms of political participation. Regardless, both camps agree the Internet has the potential to revitalize civic interaction and the public sphere.

In this two-pronged understanding of how the Internet helps facilitate government correspondence with public opinion, getting the right representatives into office is only half the battle. Once a politician takes office, citizens require means to interact with them—deliberative processes only mean so much if the institutions meant to realize that consciousness are not responsive enough to take public opinion into account. Luckily, the Internet has opened innumerable channels for closer correspondence between representatives and constituents and allows for public views and experiences to be better integrated into legislative dialogue.

As early as 1992, independent presidential candidate Ross Perot called for electronic town halls bringing citizens together with new emerging interactive technologies, where “every week or so we would take a single major issue to the people. We would explain it in great detail and then we would get a response from the owners of the country—the people—that could be analyzed by congressional district so that the Congress—no if's, and's and but's—would know what the people want” (Quoted in Fishkin 138). This impassioned defense of conscientious representation suggests that communicative technologies could enhance effective representation. Networked political participants, having access to a wide range of information on political matters from both government and civilian sources, are more informed, and so their representatives are more likely to take their views seriously and thoughtfully. This process is necessarily reciprocal—individuals who know they are being listened to will inevitably be more thoughtful and more trusting of their representatives (Lim and Kann 87). Greater trust
between constituents and representatives means deeper civic bonds, closer correspondence between policy and public opinion, and an increase in “the scope, breadth, and depth of government consultations with citizens” (Coleman and Gotze 13). Some have gone so far as to suggest this technologically mediated closeness offers the potential to include citizens in actual policy and decision-making processes (Furnas 2011). Though as of yet unproven, could policymaking even be sourced to the network in the future?

v. Inconclusive Democracy and Online Optimism

Because of its massive expansion of individuals’ ability to talk with each other and obliteration of the physical and temporal constraints of traditional dialogue, the Internet’s effect on democracy is significant and worthy of attention. Often these changes, as we’ve seen, are for the better. The Internet and other communicative technologies offer the possibility of a new, more radical and decentralized information economy, one that nicely aligns with the moral and deliberative demands of liberal democracy. Hierarchies, unilateralism, or market forces may no longer dominate the way individuals share and consume information, leading to a social information structure more egalitarian in its nature and more diverse in its content. In our rough democratic framework, we’ve discussed the necessity for communicative technologies to facilitate or at the very least preserve three fundamental aspects of democracy to consider them democratizing: the ability for individuals to communicate, the quality of that communication, and the ability to put the results of such communication into practice. Thinkers from a wide variety of fields attest that the Internet promotes all three.
Yet, while the diversity of background and opinion of the accounts of pro-Internet thinkers provides a powerful testament to the effects network technologies have on social life, they also paint a picture that is a bit confused. Through my emphasis on the Internet as a communicative tool, I’ve tried to broadly contextualize and ground many of the arguments in a deliberative democratic scheme. But to understand the full implications the Internet has on public life, we require a more rigorous account of democracy to determine what exactly democracies gain from communication. Communication is a procedural means that creates shared moral consciousness and thus the possibility of collective self-governance. For a stronger understanding of the effects the Internet has on public life, we must address what ends public life serves. With a fuller and richer conception of deliberative democracy in place, we may more clearly see the effects of a networked public sphere and what Benkler, Nissenbaum, and their peers ignore in their analysis. In the next section, I will develop a more comprehensive conception of the pragmatist underpinnings of deliberative democracy. By understanding these mechanisms, we can reassess the positive claims on communication in a new, more critical light. The reality of networked democracy is not so simple as Benkler and his peers let on.
CHAPTER III
DELIBERATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

i. Deliberative Democracy and the Promise of the Public

Democracy must be more than just the act of voting. Decision-making in a functional and flourishing democratic system doesn’t simply reflect a collection of individual wills—such an amalgamation is a tangled mess of conflicting, ill-informed opinions, characterized by bias, self-interest, ideological commitment, and petty prejudice. If I consider myself separate from all others and determine to govern shared political life by my individual interests alone, I’m confronted with millions of individuals wishing to do the exact same themselves. At its worst, the result is reminiscent of a Hobbesian “war of all against all.” At its best, such a system is incongruous, confused, and shapeless, destined for gridlock and discord. Democracy requires compromise, and compromise requires the recognition that, to an extent, private will must often adjust to public will. Disagreement is inevitable, but so too is sacrifice. For democracy to maximize the congruency of private and public interests while maintaining the individual right to self-determination requires the formation of a public, the collective of citizens who recognize and seek to shape the consequences that social and interactional processes have on their communal life. By realizing their shared stake in political action, public consciousness arises in an effort to control the unintended public consequences of particular actions. Such a public consciousness is the product of innumerable interactional processes, free and open discussions of political issues and interests, and the development of social bonds. These social bonds serve as the basis for a communal identity that reflects certain norms, values, and shared understandings.
Developing a public consciousness that can drive political dealings is the ultimate goal of proponents of a deliberative democracy. This notion of public determination makes deliberative democratic theory the most compelling normative understanding of democratic systems for two reasons: [1] its emphasis on the citizenry’s ability to determine the legitimacy of government institutions and [2] its mechanism for reconciling individual liberty with collective self-governance. Beginning with the groundbreaking social theory of Habermas, deliberative democratic theorists argue that informed public deliberation ought to drive political decision-making to achieve both these goals, something possible only with a high quality of political discourse. James Fishkin aptly acknowledges this by turning to popular opinion polls. Conventional polling, pioneered by the likes of George Gallup, provides only the rawest picture of public opinion. The typical respondent may answer a poll while knowing very little about an issue and the implications it may have for both the individual and the public as a whole. Decisions may be made from the “gut,” on pure emotion, misinformation, or prejudice (Fishkin 287). Gallup’s intention to restore the New England town meeting by discovering what the public thinks can never realized in the kind of polls now synonymous with his name.

But how can the myriad individuals that comprise an unrealized public elevate public opinion from simply an aggregate of often confused, conflicting, and irrational wills to a public consciousness of shared views capable of directing political action? To be sure, an advanced multicultural society with a legitimate plurality of moral understandings will not reach a unanimous agreement through deliberation. Rather, the public as a political entity serves as a legitimacy and norm generating body, capable of shaping political life and political decision-making through a vast web of social
interactions. These interactions determine the nature and subject of political
deliberation—how we express our political concerns, interests, and opinions, and what
the content of those concerns, interests, and opinions are. The authority of the public is
to shape the behavior, both political and mundane, of its constituents through the
spontaneous generation of legitimacy and normalcy via interactional mechanisms, not
force. The public is, in this sense, self-regulating, defining the institutions of social life
through mechanisms unique to civil society.¹ Political and legal institutions are secondary
only to the moral imagination and social control of the self-regulating public, using
legitimate force to reassert norms when social sanctions fail to promote acceptable
behavior. The mechanism for the generation of political norms and legitimacy I will put
forward draws upon sociology, social psychology, and political philosophy, producing,
ideally, an account of how the public generates collective political behavior as the basis
of a public identity and informed consciousness.

American pragmatism, as developed by Dewey, William James, and George
Herbert Mead and finding its contemporary champion in Habermas, recognizes the
essential role interaction plays in social life, basing social analysis on the fundamental fact
of that “men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt 7-8). Drawing
heavily on classical Hegelianism, the pragmatists saw interaction as an inherently
dialectical process. In face-to-face interaction, individuals confront each other as
something fundamentally foreign, but as one communicates to the other, the listener is
forced to interpret, integrate, and react to the attitudes of the communicator and vice-
versa. Through such interactional processes, individuals resolve this dialectic of

¹ Important to note here is the distinction between these two terms. Civil society consists
of the realm of non-political associations that make up day-to-day life where public
opinion is formed, whereas the public denotes the association of citizens within civil
society that actively engages with this public consciousness.
otherness, reacting to and integrating the attitudes of others who are simultaneously integrating and reacting to their attitudes. Mead posits that the role of the other, both in terms of foreign subjects and the individual subject confronting itself as an other, is central to the development of the self, and, more pressingly for our framework, the norms and the behavioral constraints that govern it.

The goal of the following several chapters is to outline the public as an interactional process of generating the norms and legitimacy that define political behavior and expression—the theoretical undercurrent and moral ends of deliberative democracy. While the main focus of deliberative democracy may be putting informed public opinion in the legislative driver’s seat, it is the creation of norms and collective political identity through such deliberation that makes informed, cohesive public opinion a valid concept in the first place. To begin, it will be worthwhile to dissect deliberative democracy, its relation to preference formation, and what makes it worth considering. From there, the picture of the public as a society-spanning web of interactions among citizens and its dual role as both a prerequisite for and a product of political deliberation will come into focus.

**ii. Republicanism, Liberalism, and Deliberation**

Deliberative democracy sets itself apart from other notions of participatory democracy by placing its normative emphasis squarely on public deliberation and public opinion. A deliberative democracy governs itself based on the rational and informed debate of its citizens, resulting not in mere compromise based on conflicting interests and reflecting the relative power of the groups involved, but rather in rational agreement. Drawing upon John Stuart Mill and Rousseau, the normative goal of democracy is not to
reflect a series of static individual preferences, but to transform preferences and educate citizens through their participation in deliberation, which at the same time transforms political structures. In a well-ordered democracy, deliberation “shapes the identity and interests of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of the public good” (Cohen 69). Through deliberation on the common good by political equals, private political preferences are reoriented toward the public good, and, in turn, states institutions come to reflect and affirm this public preference through corresponding policy and law.

This is not to say that society and the state can only be conceived of as a whole, as the sovereign citizenry. Rather, key for deliberative democratic theory, especially that of Habermas, is the separate yet dependent relationship between state apparatus and civil society. Habermas seeks to overcome the opposition between republican theories of government that argue for a totalizing and absolute sense of popular sovereignty, and liberal ones that impose constitutional limits on democratic processes so as to maintain a plurality of conflicting individual pursuits and interests (Three Models” 242).

The crystallization of this debate began long before its first political test case, the French Revolution, which pitted the Lockean idea that certain rights preexist the state against the Rousseauian vision that rights are determined by the general will. The liberal perspective holds that individual rights precede the state and take normative priority over the democratic process. These rights are to be entrenched in a constitution that is superior to the decisions of a democratic majority. By protecting private rights, the liberal system focuses on promoting individual liberty in a pluralistic society, where individuals hold many competing interests and ways of life.
This liberal conception of rights is based upon a distinctly negative sense of liberty, and the republican position attacks its fundamental presupposition. For classical republicans, rights instead emerge from the expression of the publically formed sovereign will. Each citizen is necessarily involved in the collective reasoning that results in this political will.

Perhaps the most cogent early articulator of the republican conception of democracy, Rousseau, argued that the truly free citizen maintains the same self-determination he (only men could be active citizens) has prior to the formation of any state apparatus because each citizen takes an equal part in the legislative process, creating the laws under which they live. Thus all limitations are self-imposed and so the citizen “obey[s] only himself and remain[s] as free as before” (Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Bk. I, Ch. VI 49-50). In the republican scheme, political equality is necessary to deliberative will-formation which defines individual rights. These rights do not precede the citizenry, but extend from the citizenry itself.

We might reduce the conflict between republican and liberal modes as a divergence on the fundamental question of liberty: liberals reject the sovereign will’s trampling of the individual and his freedom to pursue a variety of legitimate ends, while the republicans see the external imposition of negative freedoms as a form of unfreedom because democratic decision-making is limited by constraints that are “prior” to the individually-guided act of political deliberation. The former represents the citizenry as a collection of “dependent variables” operating in processes unguided by any sort of collective determination. The latter rather sees the citizenry “as a collective actor which reflects the whole and acts for its sake” (Habermas, “Three Models” 248).
At first glance, deliberative theory seems merely an extension of the classical republican school of thought, with its emphasis on the common good, deliberation, and collective identity. Yet, Habermasian deliberative democracy differs crucially, transcending both the atomism of liberalism and the idealism of republicanism. Seeking to maintain the radical communitarian content of democracy while remedying the absolute dependence on the virtues of the citizens, Habermas offers a synthetic third model (“Three Models,” 245). Habermas points out that communication and political self-expression occur in a multiplicity of contexts and platforms, both in formal legislative bodies and informal discussions among peers. By renouncing the excessively concrete notion of popular sovereignty held in republican theory, we may resolve the opposition between conceptions of liberty presented by republicans and liberals (Habermas, “Popular Sovereignty” 47). Habermas explains that the public isn’t a distinct body à la Rousseau, but rather a procedural medium for the ongoing process of will and opinion formation. Key to this is the distinction between “communicatively generated power” and “administratively employed power” (55). These two forms of power cross and interpenetrate each other in the public sphere, and, through the concurrent creation and fielding of legitimate power by the public and the state, a self-reflexive political association arises. Such an association reflects, in Habermas’ words, “the higher-level intersubjectivity of communication processes” that occurs in a variety of formal and informal contexts (“Three Models” 248). Whereas the republican conception sees the state and the unified will as essentially the same, deliberative theory allows for an adequate conception of civil society to coexist alongside a constitutional democratic state apparatus in which certain rights are entrenched. In civil society, the informal discursive interactional processes that define the public take place, separate from formal
deliberation that may occur within the state apparatus. The state apparatus is not organized around a comprehensive whole or any sort of public consensus, but through “the interplay between institutionally structured political will-formation and spontaneous, unsubverted circuits of communication in a public sphere that is not programmed to reach decisions and is thus not organized” (“Popular Sovereignty” 57). The coexistence of these two forms of popular sovereignty are deeply intertwined, the constitutionally-defined parameters of the state sculpted by the demands of civil society and vice-versa. Neither dominates, as in republican or liberal theory, but each is a side of a single democratic coin, the liberal moment realized in the formal apparatus of a constitutional state protecting certain rights and the republican in the communicative processes through which those rights are determined.

The reliance on the spontaneity and open-endedness of interactions in the public sphere sets the Habermasian account apart from other leading strains of deliberative thought. In this sense, classical republicanism and radical accounts fail not only to address the possibility of the coexistence of a sovereign citizenry and a constitutional state apparatus, but also the possibility of a collective political understanding that is based around shared norms and preferences and not a unified legislative consensus. For Rousseau, the general will was singular and unequivocal: a citizen couldn’t disagree with the general will; if a person did, he was simply mistaken (Social Contract, Bk. IV, Ch. II, 123-125). Habermas instead suggests that, instead of a domineering and infallible consensus, the communicative relations in civil society give rise to a shared moral framework and a shared backdrop of intersubjective meanings within which individuals develop their political views.
With civil society taking on a vital role in the democratic process, deliberative democracy “corresponds with an image of a decentered society,” one allowing for a public sphere in which the “detection, identification, and interpretation of problems affecting society as a whole” is possible (Habermas, “Three Models” 251). Fishkin suggests that most major developments in the American political system come not from constitutional amendments or formal procedures, but rather informal changes in mindset and expectations, “unofficial changes in the commonly accepted notions about how people should act in order to fulfill a given role” (Fishkin 64). It is this centrality of informal means of norm and will-formation in Habermas’ scheme that makes it particularly compelling as a democratic framework. Despite this, the Habermasian theory has its fair share of challengers—by engaging with some of the most salient objections from the field of social choice theory, we can highlight the key mechanism underlying deliberative democracy and the formation of a public moral consciousness.

**iii. Choice and the Center**

The emphasis on collective will formation and the social transformation of preferences sets deliberative democracy in stark opposition to private-instrumental views of democracy, in which a democratic system aggregates the preferences of all individuals for given alternatives. In its most extreme form, Schumpeter characterizes democracy as an economic transaction, with the casting of a ballot functioning like the private act of buying or selling something (Elster 25). More moderate articulations of this theory may diverge from Schumpeter’s rather flamboyant assertions, but still follow the underlying logic of social choice theory—the understanding of citizens as having private interests
and unchanging ordinal preferences\textsuperscript{2} and the task of democracy being to aggregate these private preference into Pareto-optimal choices in which options that are individually preferred by everyone are preferred socially (5). In this account, political decisions reflect the aggregation of individual preferences without the need for any process of deliberation. The emphasis on aggregated individual preference over public deliberation leads Jon Elster to describe the dichotomy between social-choice and deliberative models of democracy as “The Market” versus “The Forum” (3). The social choice model views democracy not as a normative system but simply as a method for “arriving at political—legislative and administrative—decisions” (Schumpeter 242).

A critical analysis of the economic theory of democracy allows us to draw out the most crucial advantage of what we might call a passive-deliberative conception of democracy. For a moment, let us envision the democratic process as a sort of market: we have a given set of agents with preferences over a given set of alternatives. In that same moment, let’s assume these preferences are static and are transitive and ordinal: if individuals prefer A to B and B to C, then they will always take A over C. These preferences may be shaped by any number of factors: what is possible, what is preferred by others, what has been preferred in the past, and so on. In this sense, the voter isn’t much different from the consumer faced with buying one brand of milk or shoes rather than another. Thus, if we aggregate all individual preferences, we are left with something

\textsuperscript{2} Schumpeter would likely disagree with this point, his analysis of the content of democracy diverging from his methodological considerations. Citizens themselves were so poorly informed that to call their votes political preferences would be a vast overstatement. Democracy was the “rule of the politician,” not the people, and just like “a department store cannot be defined in terms of its brands,” the parties voters supported, “cannot be defined in terms of [their] principles” (Schumpeter 283, 285). I am indebted to Professor Donald Moon for this point.
we can appropriately call *social* preference, so long as all individuals count equally or don’t have unfair influence over this aggregate preference.³

This is a pretty picture. Complementing social preferences are the actions of politicians and parties, whose well being in a democracy depends on receiving the most votes in elections. They too will then act in their own best interest, creating policy that mirrors social preferences as closely as possible in order to achieve a majority of votes (Downs 137). The distribution of voters along a single ideological axis is apt to be like a normal curve—a high concentration of voters in some cluster between the two poles with dispersion tapering out toward the extremes. Social preference thus reflects this popularly constituted ideological center, and, in efforts to garner votes, parties orient their platforms toward the median position. However this mechanism marginalizes the minority’s views in lawmaking.

But the economic approach to democracy suggests that democracy is little more than a national public opinion poll, the simple aggregation of political outlook in its rawest form. As noted by Fishkin, public opinion in its raw form may not reflect the public good in any meaningful sense, as preferences may be based on self-interest, prejudices, or fictions rather than thoughtful deliberation. The model assumes political preferences are static and focuses on reflecting a government based on preferences as they are and not as they might out to be. Deliberative democracy has two advantages in this regard, that of a normative emphasis on the public good and the pragmatic

³ As Kenneth Arrow has shown, when voters are faced with three or more distinct options, there is no guarantee that their preferences can be aggregated into a single social welfare function. Thus, this example is more complicated than I have let on. However, Arrow’s Impossibility Theorum, while important, does not bear greatly on my introduction of social choice theory or at all on my broader argument. For those reasons, it its reasonable to acknowledge this issue but not engage with it fully. Such is the task for another project.
acknowledgement that individual preferences are shaped by preference-altering social norms. The economic theory of democracy fails to account for the contingency of preferences, ignoring instead of engaging them. But from the social choice perspective, Elster suggests that Habermas’ deliberative scheme would be guilty of self-censorship, conformity, and paternalism (11-12).  

Perhaps he is not wrong, but his disquiet is, to an extent, misguided. Deliberative democracy does promote mainly one essential form of constraint upon forms of legitimate argument, that an option cannot be justified on solely in terms of an individual’s self-interest. Other constraints are socially and culturally contingent. If an individual explains that, under a certain tax policy, he or she will be better off, those listening aren’t going to be particularly convinced—as a social practice, democracy doesn’t lend itself to such expressions of self-interest. Voters are not the same thing as consumers, as preferences are contingent—role and context do shape how we think and act. How I act around a close friend will inevitably differ from how I compose myself with a new acquaintance, my grandmother, or a police officer. Social choice theories conflate the roles of consumer and citizen, assuming that the changes in preference between the two are the product of self-censorship. When I buy something as a private consumer, I mainly affect only myself, but when voting for a certain policy platform, I make a decisions that affect all other citizens. It is no paradox that an individual may support welfare programs but not give to the poor or support pro-choice legislation while abhorring the prospect of having an abortion (Sunstein 128). Norms associated with citizenship can push individuals to act more altruistically or public-mindedly than they would in their capacity as a private consumer as they must justify political positions

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4 Elster’s comments mirror some of the problems of the public to be addressed in the second half of this project.
to others who are affected by them. Sure, self-interested action is rampant in democratic politics, but also citizens regularly are able to solve the kind of collective action problems private individuals are not. Political preference is fundamentally different then private preference as it is governed by a separate set of role-related norms.

As political life is inherently group-oriented, in that the citizen makes decisions as an individual for an outcome that affects the group, communal norms arise through the very process of deliberation that the economic theory of democracy ignores. This gives rise to a second question. The argument that democratic groups vying for public support will move toward the highest concentration of voters, clustered in what we might call the political center, deliberately avoids considerations of the content of democrat and in doing so raises the question of where that center is located along a political spectrum and what positions a “centrist” might identify with. It leaves us with only a half-finished picture—by fleshing out the formation of the political center, I hope to highlight the deliberative processes that underlie even social choice theory.

The world is filled with democratic systems populated with a variety of political parties. While these parties are often classified in their relation to the political center—the American GOP and the Swedish four-party Alliance are both described as “center-right,” for instance—such classification fails to reflect any sort of shared political belief. The Swedish center is far to the left of the American center, and while approaching the Swedish center ostensibly from the right, the Alliance largely supports the expansive Swedish welfare state, whereas the GOP does not support the American equivalent. The same is true for social policy (the Alliance generally backs same-sex marriage, the GOP does not) and a variety of other platform planks. Both parties seek votes in the center,
but where that center lies on the political spectrum is not a fixed point. There is no “centrist” philosophy. Rather, that theory of centrism is culturally and socially contingent.

We might conceive of the political center not as any fixed ideology, but rather as the nexus of a political community’s shared political values and discursively generated views. As individuals communicate in civil society, shared norms and preferences develop. These preferences aren’t hard and fast however. Rather, they form boundaries of acceptable preferences available to citizens, binding them to certain norms of democratic possibilities. These boundaries define a limited political discourse constrained by collective norms and sentiments and enforced through informal mechanisms of social control. The origins of such a political center are rooted in the development of a political consciousness and identity produced by way of interactional processes. The political center, thus, is that ideological standpoint that most fully embodies those shared values in their most common form. While some individuals farther to the left or the right may justify certain policies by shared norms, they may construe them in ways not held by the majority of citizens. Such individuals are not in the center, but are still within the democratic constrains produced by deliberation. The formation of political constraints and a political center at the nexus of those constraints reflects deliberative democracy in a more passive form—where informal discursive practices form political preferences in

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Complicating this notion of the formation of a political center is the possibility that political conflict occurs along more dimensions than just a right-left dichotomy, as is often the case in multiparty democracies. In democratic states with a large degree of heterogeneity—be it religious, ethnic, linguistic, or some other factor—a variety of divisions may gain political expression and lead to a potpourri of incompatible frameworks instead of a singular shared one. In such a case, parties representing a vast array of conflicting interests often form coalitions. Coalition building reflects a similar logic of constraint as Downs’ economic model. Parties forgo a full range of democratic possibilities for the power and legitimacy associated with appealing to the greatest number of voters, just as they would in a left-right system.
non-political interactions within civil society—fully realized in active deliberative politics. These limits can come in any variety of forms and have a variety of limits as determined by a discursively produced public consciousness. For the grand majority of American democratic history, racial segregation was a perfectly acceptable position, while today its been expelled from the legitimate public sphere, reflecting shifts in what the public deems acceptable and what it doesn’t. The relative extent of welfare redistribution, as proposed and as enacted, varies accordingly among states with different norms and expectations as to the role of government. Acceptable political preferences are those that can be justified within a fluid and contingent public moral scheme.

Having established that deliberative democracy leads to the creation of a constraining moral framework in which individuals form preferences⁶, the next step will be to elaborate on the processes that this range of preferences are formed. Crucial to stress again before I move on is that, especially within the context of the passive or latent public, the norms generated are frameworks rather than fiats, constraints upon preferences, but not specific preferences themselves. Over the course of the next chapter, I will explore the mechanisms at the heart of interpersonal communication that make the formation of a public possible.

⁶ Throughout this thesis, I use a variety of phrases to refer to this framework of legitimate preferences and political actions, the most prominent of which being “public moral consciousness” and “shared normative framework.” These phrases (and some variations of them) all reflect the full range of acceptable actions and standpoints as limited by shared values born out of the myriad interactions between members of a public. We might think of such shared values as existing separately from most personal values. For instance, I may legitimately hold Christian principles myself within a framework valuing religious tolerance and freedom—these publically held values constitute a framework within which more specific values may exist, allowing others who do not hold the same values to see such competing moral conceptions as still legitimate.
CHAPTER IV
IT’S ALL TALK: CONSTRUCTING NORMS AND LEGITIMACY

i. Demanding demands

For an economic or deliberative theory of democracy to take root, we must outline the process through which communal political preferences are generated. This is not to say I will account for how an individual’s preferences are formed. There exists such a massive diversity of beliefs and an even greater diversity of justifications for those beliefs that it is not possible to account for their genesis. Rather, the question I seek to answer is the development of common threads between broadly classified “mainstream” political views in certain political contexts—the mainstream, in this sense, means views that can be justified within the moral standpoint of the public consciousness. Given the wide variety of possible sets of political preferences, can we identify a mechanism to explain what creates a “political center” and constrains what views are seen as legitimate in popular political discourse? As shown, the preferences of political actors are fundamentally different from the preferences of consumers—when making decisions that affect an entire group, different norms come into play from those governing individual consumer choices. And similarly, the preferences of the content of the political center, that is, the largest cluster of voters sharing political views in between two extreme poles, are contingent upon social and cultural factors and vary from community to community.

Habermas describes human motivations as having “an immanent relation to truth [Wahrheitsbezug],” that is, motivations are derived from the shared backdrop of meanings and behavioral expectations developed through discourse and social controls on
behavior \textit{(Legitimation 95)}. This normative consciousness serves as the fundamental basis for political legitimacy, the interplay between authority and authority’s potential to be morally and factually justified. The acceptability of a form of domination is prefaced upon the claims to obedience made by rulers to the ruled. Habermas, ever focused on the effects of advanced capitalism, suggest the following example:

“Because the reproduction of class societies is based on the privileged appropriation of socially produced wealth, all such societies must resolve the problem of distributing the surplus social product inequitably and yet legitimately. They do so by means of structural force, that is, by fixing in a system of observed norms the asymmetrical distribution of legitimate chances to satisfy needs.” (96)

Recognition of such unequal distribution of resources as legitimate requires grounding in the norms that constitute the moral consciousness of a society. Individuals may justify unequal distribution in any number of ways, ranging from as systematic and comprehensive as classical liberalism or its Rawlsian reinterpretation (which imposes limits on inequality) to vague allusions to meritocracy or other cultural beliefs and symbols. In American society, the capitalist apologist may reference any number of symbols—the values of the founding fathers, the Constitution, a cultural pantheon filled with “self-made men” (Howe), or ideals like the American Dream, the Protestant ethic, and what not. As long as certain political actions are justifiable with reference to a public moral consciousness grounded in discursively propagated norms and meanings, they can be accepted as legitimate. Such public consciousness corresponds with an image of what a government should and should not do for its citizens, meaning that a government may
lose legitimacy by failing to meet certain normative demands placed on it by its citizens. Some actions or policies may be within a government’s legal authority, but may not correspond with the public vision of what the government is supposed to do. Civilian expectations limit a regime, and the threat of losing legitimacy (and, subsequently, regime power) provide an impetus for acting in line with public moral consciousness. Congress may technically have the power to unilaterally declare war on Canada or levy an 85% flat tax rate, but without justifying these actions in some way grounded in the public moral consciousness, democratic politicians enacting such policies would lose public support or even encounter civil disobedience.

Similarly, a state apparatus must live up to the public view of what a government should do. If a government is expected to maintain economic development and protect freedom of expression, but fails to do so (by letting an economy stagnate or persecuting certain religions), “it lags behind programmatic demands that it has placed on itself. The penalty for this failure is withdrawal of legitimation” (Habermas, *Legitimation* 69). In such a case, the legitimacy of an existing order can entirely disappear—the ruler and the ruled are faced with a legitimation crisis, where the continuity of a regime is called into question. The concept of a legitimation crisis underlies the many historical articulations of a right to revolution—the moral authority to violently overthrow a government if it no longer serves the purposes it was initially established for, deliberately overstepping the bounds of popular or cultural legitimacy.

A similar, though not identical idea, I suggest, stands at the core of an economic theory of democracy: what is deemed legitimate and illegitimate is the product of individual moral consciousness, itself a product of the discursive reproduction of norms and the internalization of symbols. The highest concentration of individuals sharing
similar political-moral frameworks between two ideological poles constitutes the political center when a coherent one exists. Seeking to maximize their share of the public vote, political parties move toward this “center” ideologically—their actions and positions are constrained by the moral considerations of the center, as they must be justifiable on moral grounds held by at least the majority of the public. Representatives, by nature of their elected position, must act within the moral framework held by their constituents, or at least a majority of them, lest they be voted out of office. Legitimacy need not be a sweeping abstraction—voters may express moral discontent with their elected officials any time they enter the voting booth. Public moral consciousness defines the actions of politicians by cementing them ideologically at a moderate point between the most extreme views entertained in civil public discourse. All societies will have fringe political ideologies that, under an economic theory, are risky for parties to adopt, as they would lose votes. Some political positions are thus simply unfeasible given the political center, and often, though not necessarily, these positions may take on negative moral connotations. Socialism, communism, and fascism are dirty words in American politics. Save for a select few constituencies, politicians labeling themselves as such face dismal prospects for election. With an understanding of how legitimacy constrains what a state apparatus can and cannot do, my next step will be to argue that legitimacy also shapes and constrains activities within civil society as well.

Discursive forms of moral development not only limit the platforms and policies of politicians themselves, but, more broadly, those political views that can be taken as legitimate in discussion and practice. A hallmark of deliberative democracy, as we have noted, is the necessity for political arguments to be justified on general, not personal grounds. A politician who steps to the front of the Senate and claims she will not
support tax increases on the wealthy because she will be worse off will most likely not remain a politician for long. Such naked self-interest violates a norm that limits what political positions and justifications are acceptable in the public eye. Public moral consciousness comes to shape and constrain public discourse as well as the state apparatus. Prior to the formation of a sense of public morality, democracies are faced with an incredibly broad range of potential paths of actions and policy pursuits, and, necessarily, their constituents have may have as many preferences. Just as the arrival of such a shared consciousness limits government action to those policies seen as legitimate, so too does it limit what political preferences can be legitimately held and expressed in the public sphere. This is not to say all individuals hold the same moral views or political preferences, but rather that to be accepted within the public sphere, beliefs and political values must exist within some sort of commonly understood framework.

Individuals may hold views outside of this legitimate range of views, but if they express them to the grand majority of their peer citizens, they may receive strong negative reactions as they likely transgress a discursive norm. For example, political arguments based upon blatant racial superiority, political exclusion, or radical political ideologies fail to hold water in the American system. People certainly still hold these views, but, if expressed publically, often find less than accepting audiences. A recent example is former U.S. Congressman Todd Akin, a Republican candidate from Missouri who ran for Senate in 2012, who received widespread denunciation across party lines after suggesting that abortion should not be legal in cases of rape and incest because pregnancy does not occur in cases of “legitimate rape.” That genuine rape cannot cause pregnancy, of course, is simply untrue, but politicians and individuals often make
political decisions based on fiction and receive barely a fraction of Akin’s scrutiny. This case suggests that the political argument Akin expressed transgressed a public norm by suggesting rape victims who had become pregnant had not been “legitimately” raped.\(^1\) The same mechanisms of denunciation and ostracism may define the one-to-one or many-to-many interactions of political discourse in civil society. If a friend or coworker made a similar argument, he or she can expect to receive a similarly harsh reaction. Over time, individuals internalize this norm, coming to expect social sanctions if they take certain actions or ideological positions. Not only are the positions of political parties hemmed in by their self-interest, so too are the viable ideologies of individual voters. Like all behaviors undertaken in a social context, political arguments are subject to the constraining power of norms.

\[\textit{ii. What's in a Norm? Norm Enforcement and Social Control}\]

The idea that “self-criticism is essentially social criticism” is crucial in understanding the development of discursive norms of political legitimacy (Mead, \textit{Mind} 254-255). It is simple enough to say that a social constraint exists, but a question remains: how does such a constraint come to actually change the behavior of individuals? It is not enough to claim an informal norm forces people to act a certain way—what distinguishes an informal norm from the biological impulse to eat or criminal laws against murder or theft? Both cause people to act in different ways than they might otherwise, promoting certain behaviors (eating when hungry, not murdering or stealing)

\(^1\) Again, subcultures can exist in democracies that can radically deviate from an overarching public consciousness. A large number of voters were able to look past his comments, while a smaller number actively supported his claim. Yet, such pockets are isolated in both deliberative and economic models of democracy. Legitimacy requires broad public approval to have any regulative effect on the state or individual conduct.
while discouraging other ones (not eating, plundering and pillaging), just as a social expectation does. We can gain a more specified understanding of an informal norm as distinct from biological needs and laws by looking at what, in each case, compels individuals to change or tailor their behavior.

Needs are the outlier here. Certain behaviors are hardwired into the human psyche: eat, drink, procreate, so on. The searing pain I feel when I put my hand on a hot stove tells me I shouldn’t touch hot objects—these compulsive forces are entirely endogenous to the individual, and the subject of inquiry for biologists. More interesting and relevant is the distinction between norms and laws, behavioral constraints exogenous to the individual.

A simple point might be to say that laws stem from the state, while norms do not. While this isn’t entirely wrong, it is lacking to a degree—socially enforced norms limit political behavior that, in turn, influences state action. Laws and norms comingle, reinforcing and redefining each other—norms upholding the sanctity of private property might become codified into legal protections against certain kinds of seizure, a legally protected right to freedom of speech might produce certain conventions for self-expression, and so on. Laws and social norms are mutually contingent, just as the state and society are. And while we can’t simply say laws stem from the state and norms from society, such an idea is not without merit. As famously stated by Max Weber in his landmark essay, “Politics as a Vocation,” the state possesses “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (78). In the Weberian scheme, only the state may use violence to pursue its end, a tactful rearticulation of Locke’s notion that individuals bestow their right to use force onto the state, and in turn, the state wields the power to levy the punishment of death. Essentially, one facet of states is their claim to
the legitimate use of force in order to protect individuals from certain actions. In the
Lockean conception of the state of nature, individuals may protect or enforce their
natural rights according to their own discretion—each individual has a claim to the use
of legitimate force. However, with the introduction of a state apparatus, only state forces
may enforce such rights, codifying them into what we might call laws—behavioral
standards or principles enforced by state-sponsored and publicly legitimated violence.
This is merely a provisional definition, however—debates over the meaning of the
concept of law have fascinated and engaged philosophers of law for centuries, and will
likely continue to do so.

Laws, however, do not entirely define individual behavior—liberal democracy is
prefaced upon the notion that laws in fact protect dimensions of society from state
interference, what some liberals deem natural or human rights. But while states may use
legitimate force to protect individuals from infringement of their right to free speech this
doesn’t necessarily mean that all forms of self-expression are socially acceptable. All over
the world, informal behavioral expectations, that is, certain behavioral constraints or
standards not enforced by a state apparatus, exist. The reactions to Congressman Akin’s
“legitimate rape” comments are only one example of the myriad informal pressures that
promote some actions including forms of speech and discourage others. Though Akin’s
ability to speak freely is legally protected, public backlash reflects the power of informal
norms to go beyond laws.\(^3\) Through such norms, a society can somehow manage to

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\(^3\) This point reveals an important distinction in the Habermasian model. The state
apparatus and the moral consciousness of civil society enforce two different sets of
values: in the Akin case, the state protects free speech, while the public protects free
speech so far as it does not marginalize or discriminate against others. This serves as a
distinguishing factor between the republican model and the Habermasian deliberative
one. Whereas in the republican scheme, public moral consciousness is literally law,
police itself within a behavioral framework enforced by a coexisting state authority, to “regulate itself according to desired principles and values” (Janowitz 82).

Public moral consciousness grounds certain behaviors in such principles and values. As we come to recognize each other as members of a moral community, we internalize social standards and expectations as our own—context shapes the individuals moral imagination in a way ideally rooted in mutual recognition. Prior to any sort of rational weighing of costs and benefits of certain actions, we develop a conception of how we ought to act through our interactions with others and our public experiences and form preferences and desire in accordance with those values. Public moral consciousness comes to form perspectives that shape us as much as we shape them—social living constitutes a passive sort of moral education. In the Akin example, most politicians and citizens would simply see proclamations about the “legitimacy” of rape as inherently immoral rather than avoiding such statements out of fear of some negative public response. However, when individuals such as Akin fail to internalize these public morals, secondary mechanisms allow for members of moral communities to regulate these violators behavior and reinforcing their internalized values. If the organic integration of public values gives rise to a public, the informal enforcement of norms allows the public to regulate itself in accordance with that shared conscious.

Making such a regulative secondary mechanism possible is the idea of social control, an idea based on recognition of a powerful distinction between the state and society and the influence each has on patterns of behavior of their members. Social control, in this sense, is the opposite of what Morris Janowitz calls coercive control—behavioral restraints prefaced on the use or threat of force, or what we might call, under

Habermas’ independent constitutional state may legally protect certain rights that can run contrary to the distinct values held by the public.
the assumption that states possess a legitimate monopoly on the use of force, a law (84).

Fear of shame, ridicule, criticism, and ostracism, for example, can drive individuals to conform to or internalize certain behavioral patterns they hadn’t otherwise just as the fear of physical pain pushes them to follow laws. Loss of love and fear of pain defined Freud and Nietzsche’s original formulations of the mind’s self-regulatory capacities—by internalizing the role of the punisher, the individual became the policeman of his or her own mental landscape (Nietzsche 61-66; Freud 113-129). Given the social contingency of punishable behaviors, the idea that “self-criticism is essentially social criticism” rings true (Mead, Mind 244-245). But informal forms of social control don’t simply arise out of thin air—what makes social control particularly of interest is its production and maintenance process, one that’s entirely endogenous to civil society itself. In the next section, I will approach the question of how social control and the shared frameworks it makes possible come into being. In doing so, I will develop a conception of interpersonal interaction that will serve as the basis for our understanding of the public.

iii. Enforcing the Unenforced: A Dialectical Model of Social Control

The language used thus far to explain social control requires a bit of a disclaimer—while the idea of social control as the means of a society regulating itself in accordance with desired principles is certainly not wrong, it may impute a sort of false agency to

Their accounts, however, offer a sort of Hobbesian conception of human nature that sees individual behavioral patterns based purely on instrumental rational approach to fulfilling desires. What they do not acknowledge is the origin of the individual’s desires, which stem from the moral education they gain as individuals are brought up within a certain social scheme. Social control exists a sort of second layer of behavioral regulation on top of the internalization of the values of a moral community. The ability to enforce norms is not the prime sculpting force of community members’ values, but is their prime tool for regulating the actions of others toward those values. The internalization of punishment is secondary to the internalization of norms in the first place.
society. There is no predetermined “desired principle” or established normative framework that a society’s constituents subconsciously enforce through their social interactions. Rather, social interaction itself defines the nature of the principles desired as they are enforced—the process of self-regulation changes the regulatory framework. In the words of George Herbert Mead, “the growth of moral consciousness must be coterminous with that of the moral situation” (“Ethics” 74).

“The social act,” writes Mead, “is not explained by building it up out of stimulus plus response; it must be taken as a dynamic whole—as something going on—no part of which can be understood by itself—a complex organic process implied by each individual stimulus and response involved in it” (Mind 7). Social action, in Mead’s view, entails multiple subjects viewing each other as objects. Mead’s central question is to understand what it means to be self-conscious, to be aware of oneself as at once a subjective self and the object of other subjective selves. The individual must bring itself “into the same experiential field as that of the other individual selves in relation to whom he acts in any given social situation” (138). Social interactions force the abstraction of an individual’s own subjectivity, reflexively placing itself in the position of the other through the eyes of the others—the individual comes to indirectly understand him or herself as an object by “taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved” (138). Interaction is in this way the process of mutual reaction—when I say statement X, my conversational counterpart interprets it, reacts to it, and responds with Y, I respond with Z, and so on. Yet, by abstracting from one’s own subjectivity, each individual also is aware of what or how he or she is saying—my expression of statement X defines statement Z by way of my counterpart’s statement Y. By interpreting and
reacting to my expressions and attitudes, an individual or group’s attitudes and
expressions change, and those changes define their expressions and attitudes, which in
turn, I interpret and integrate.

When extrapolated to the whole network of interacting individuals that compose a
society, this integration and expression comes to define what Mead describes as the
“generalized other,” the set of shared attitudes and expectations held by a community
brought out in the process of reacting to and integrating the expressions and attitudes of
others. Baseball teams provide a striking and succinct example of this idea—I may
choose to throw a pitch or hit a ball, but nine people simply choosing to throw or hit
balls does not constitute a baseball team. Rather, given the shared attitudes and
expectations of the players (as dictated by the rules), each individual player’s actions are
determined by the actions he or she assumes other players will make. When I throw a
ball to first base to get a force out, I do so because I expect the first baseman will catch it
to complete the play. Each individual’s reaction to a stimuli (say, reacting to a pop fly by
running under the airborne ball and shouting, “I’ve got it!”) reflects the internalization of
the general group attitudes (get three outs to get a chance to score more runs in order to
win the game) (Mead, *Mind* 154-158). The team, in this microcosmic case, is the
generalized other.

Mead suggests the equivalent for concepts like property—if I claim such and such
as my property, that claim is only meaningful so far as “that affirmation calls out a
certain set of responses which must be the same in any community in which property
exists” (*Mind* 161). Let us imagine a two-person community, myself and my neighbor
Albert. If I claim a fruit tree as mine, and Albert reacts to that claim by refraining from
consuming its fruit without my permission, I will do the same for a tree Albert claims.
We set the basis for a form of social order based on shared behavioral expectations. But, in a separate case, if I were to make a property claim on the tree and Albert were to simply take its fruit, that would show that the notion of property is not part of our shared behavioral expectations. The integration of the expectations and attitudes of others leads to certain patterns of behavior that give meaning to symbols or concepts by promoting certain forms of behavior surrounding them. In this sense, Mead suggests, discourse is a sort of moral or behavioral education, the “interchange of experience in which [one] brings his experience to be interpreted by the experience of [another]” (“Psychology” 38). Most simply, “social control depends, then, upon the degree to which individuals in society are able to assume the attitudes of the others who are involved with them in common endeavors” (“Genesis” 273).

Yet, thus far, this seems like a recipe for the continuation of certain codified behavioral patterns that go continually unbroken. The skeptic may respond that this notion that social control hinges on the integration of the attitudes of others seems particularly static or deterministic: individuals are free to make their choices! Social reactions to stimuli change! Just look at slavery, torture, or sex!

These concerns are entirely merited. Yet, they ignore the fluidity that makes Mead’s analysis so compelling in the first place. The internalization of attitudes and reactions to those attitudes are an inevitable part of social interaction—even if an individual decides to openly flaunt certain conventions or expectations by acting in ways contrary to the assumptions of the generalized other, he or she is still internalizing and responding to those attitudes (Mead, Mind 193). This idea would fascinate Foucault a half-century later—even within certain discursive paradigms, the individual could choose to reject the conditions of those paradigms and act in potentially “deviant” ways. Thus, in a simplified
example, Foucault argues that a 18th or 19th century housewife could resist the dominating marital structure by utilizing other forms of power, “they could deceive their husbands, pilfer money from them, refuse them sex.” And while Foucault provides an interesting parallel account to Mead for reconciling the possibility for free will amid cultural structures of behavior modification, he fails to account for the second critique—acknowledging how these paradigms change. His deflated concession that individuals are “still in a state of domination insofar as these options [for resistance] were ultimately only stratagems that never succeeded in reversing the situation” provides no answer to this question (292). With the understanding of the discursive formation of social control that Mead offers, however, both the individual’s attitudes and those of the generalized other (what Foucault sees as based upon structures of power-knowledge), are mutually dependent. Mead writes in *Mind, Self, and Society*:

“Fundamental attitudes are presumably those that are only changed gradually, and no one individual can reorganize the whole society; but one is continually affecting society by his own attitude because he does bring up the attitude of the group toward himself, responds to it, and through that response changes the attitude of the group. This is, of course, what we are constantly doing in our imagination, in our thought; we are utilizing our own attitude to bring about a different situation in the community of which we are a part; we are exerting ourselves, bringing forward our own opinion, criticizing the attitudes of others, and approving or disapproving. But we can do that only in so far as we can call out in ourselves the response of the community; we only have ideas
in so far as we are able to take the attitude of the community and then respond to it.” (179-180)

Here, we see the beginnings of the formation of a public moral consciousness in the development of shared interpretative frames, a generalized mindset born out of many singular social interactions within an overlapping network. Moving beyond Mead’s behavioralism, we might understand such community attitudes as a major component of a lifeworld, which envelopes the totality of shared meanings that constitute individual attitudes. The idea of the lifeworld will factor greatly into the second half of this project. But for now, we must further grapple with the assumptions of Mead’s theory of communication, which will give us greater insight into how the public is formed.

iv. The Conditions of Control

Of key importance to Mead’s theory of communication is the assumption of face-to-face interaction—directness brought out of shared space and synchronicity are keys to the interactions Mead outlines, aspects that define the immediate reactiveness that define communication. Technologically mediated forms of communication (through letters, phone calls, or online forums, for instance) stretch and redefine these two core aspects of face-to-faceness, or in the case of the Internet, obviate them entirely. Thus, to understand how technology affects communication, it’s of great importance to understand the roles space and time play in social interaction.

Shared space and synchronicity provide a key component of communication, identifiability—that when I communicate X, the “I” who is communicating is easily acknowledged as the communicator of X. My expressions prompt reactions from groups which act as forms of social control, but those reactions don’t inherently have any
motivational power on their own. Rather, these reactions imply the possibility of further negative attitudes toward an individual if they aren’t internalized in some meaningful way. If Ambrose uses offensive or derogatory language and Bettina reacts poorly (perhaps showing visible discomfort, expressing disapproval, or active chastisement), Ambrose will either remedy his behavior or run the risk of alienating himself further from Bettina and others. If he persists, Bettina may choose to block Ambrose out, even in contexts outside of conversation. Word may get around that Ambrose holds hostile political views or unsavory racialist perspectives—when I see him buying groceries or walking his dog, that label colors my interactions with him. I may act coldly if I’m truly disturbed, or simply avoid controversial subjects. In either case, Ambrose’s words to Bettina condition my perspective of him, which conditions my actions toward him. One of Mead’s great contemporaries, philosopher John Dewey, like his pragmatist peers, was enamored by the notion of consequence, writing alongside James Hayden Tufts that the social “act is a matter that concerns others as well as himself, and they will prove their concern by calling him to account; and if he cannot give a satisfactory and credible account of his intention, subject him to correction” (436). Behaviors have consequences that prompt reactions that function as punishments. He owns his words in this sense, and is held responsible for them. The radical street preacher I see handing out pamphlets on a street corner will still be a radical street preacher when I see him feeding pigeons in the park. With face-to-face interaction, communicators are fundamentally accountable for what they say, and they carry the effects of their interactions with them wherever they go.

This stems from a fundamental quality of communication in shared spatial dimensions, the inherent visibility of embodied individuals and, as I discussed in Chapter
II, the identifiers associated with them. In social context, that is, any instance featuring a multitude of embodied subjectivities viewing other embodied subjects as objects, this quality of “viewing” is crucial. I collect information when I go on an afternoon walk. I see grass covered with a smattering of snow. I see a variety of flyers advertising this or that event. I see buildings which allow me to determine my spatial location. But perhaps most importantly, I see other people walking around, going about their business and collecting information and identifiers in the same way I am. I am aware of their awareness, and they are, most often, aware of mine—in any social context, individuals see and are seen. As a result, people ascribe ownership of actions to the individuals who perpetrate them. An individual may shout “fire” in a crowded movie theater or start a fight with a patron at a bar—the quality of mutual awareness means people present can use identifiers to identify the physical performer of the act even if they know nothing about them beyond what their senses can immediately ascertain. Visibility and identifiability are major conditions of acting in shared space and time—we will explore the implications these factors (and their absence) have for accountability and deliberation in greater detail in the last chapters of this thesis.

With a more robust theory of communication in place, we can use the mechanisms discussed here to explore the formation of the public. Mead touched on the rise of a “generalized other,” a collective reactive frame of expectations, and idea underlying the notion of a public. In the next chapter, I will discuss how, as individuals deliberate about political and social problems in the public sphere, a distinctly political shared attitude comes to bear—the public.
CHAPTER V
PRAGMATISM, THE PUBLIC, AND POSSIBILITY

i. The Public and the Origins of Civil Society

Dewey would go so far as to argue deliberation possesses a moral value in itself due to its role in defining, altering, and creating moral ideals. Moral consciousness is the product of deliberation and discourse, and thus communication becomes a moral good itself: “no such separation exists between forming and choosing an end to action” (“Study of Ethics” 4:259). However, we need not ascribe moral value to communication to understand that it is essential in the creation of moral ideas, social convention, and, by extension, shared frameworks of behavior. Individuals talk to each other. Whether or not they realize it, in their daily chit-chat citizens lay the groundwork for an overarching moral frame of attitudes and expectations as presented in Mead’s generalized other. While perhaps asserting that discourse writ large is moral is too strong, we may fairly state that dialogue allows for individuals, to a certain extent, to hold agency over shared norms and beliefs. When coupled with democracy, greater deliberation strengthens representation by aligning political norms and behavioral assumptions closer to public expectations, constraining the limits of acceptable and unacceptable political behavior in state institutions and civil society in more communally satisfactory ways.

Liberal democracy itself arose concurrently with the rise of public discourse. By allowing for the large-scale articulation of certain moral demands on the state—legal equality, personal liberties, abstract law—the discussion fostered in Europe’s coffee shops and markets opposed, challenged, and weakened the absolutism of pre- and early-modern political systems (Habermas, Structural Transformation 54). Without the public’s
awareness of itself as a source of collective authority, claims to or against an institution’s legitimacy have little meaning—one dissatisfied individual does not make a legitimation crisis. But discussion in the public sphere has allowed for the realization of legitimacy as a political concept—the idea that a democracy can be regulated in its actions and limited in its possibilities by discursively generated norms both in terms of institutional actions and the behaviors of the individuals that make up those institutions. In terms of democracy, those individuals constitute a public. This broadly constituted public is the source of legitimation and at once the generator and enforcer of the norms that constrain the democracies they form. But while we understand the chief function of the public, we still lack a concrete definition: what is a public and how does it come about?

Like Mead, Dewey was fascinated by the domino-like effect of a single action performed in a social context, “the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of those consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others” (The Public 12). Even a conversation between two neighbors can have consequences that ripple out to affect an entire community, each action setting off a reaction, and reactions to that reaction. In a discursive sense, the distinctions between what is private and what is public are particularly ambiguous, by no means limited to artificial divides between the individual and the community. The butcher, the baker, the brewer all pursue self-interest through ostensibly private transactions, but as Adam Smith has argued, also “promote an end which is no part his intention…by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it” (456). Activity affects association, and association activity. Individuals may have distinct wants desires, abilities, and outlooks, but each of those
stem from a consciousness that is conditioned by Arendt’s maxim that we live in a world of many acting together.

While all associations influence the behaviors of the individuals that constitute them, not all such associations are inherently publics—rather a public arises when an association recognizes its self-contingency, and acknowledges the “extensive and enduring indirect consequences” of each individual’s actions on the actions of all other individuals and, ultimately, the whole, accounting for the “relativity of states” of associations. This recognition of a community’s self-reflexivity gives rise to a communal desire for mediating the influence of conjoint behavior on individual and conjoint behavior itself (Dewey, *The Public* 47). Thus, the public is an association with a common interest in controlling its own development. Dewey’s aim for the public was for it to fully realize itself through expression in a democratic state. Such a process is the continuation of an historical trajectory of broadening communicative relations that began with the economic and political transformation of society that first gave rise to the public sphere. This course, we might expect, is realized most fully by the Internet.

The public comes into being when a group of individuals recognize that they have a shared fate in part because of the indirect effects they have on each other. The shape and scope of a public is contingent upon two factors: interaction among individuals and the means of that interaction, who communicates and how they communicate. As we have discussed, norms of behavior are the product of communicative processes between two or more individuals, with the consequences of one act rippling out to affect others. One individual’s action prompts a reaction in their communicative counterpart that may change how their counterpart acts with another person and so on and so forth, a chain of interactive cause and effect. This sphere of
action, in a sense, is the nexus of individual and group expressions that inherently alter following expressions by oneself and others. In such social context, all expressions are integrated into the individual, calling forth reactions that call forth further reactions in other individuals.

However, the scope and meaning of a “communicative community” remain ambiguous. Let us define a communicative community as a cumulative social network, my affiliations with others amalgamated with those others’ affiliations—a social network of networks. Prior to the ability to send and share information across large distances, these networks were localized, contingent on whom one would run into while going about one’s day-to-day business. In this case, interaction only occurs face-to-face, giving communication a distinct spatial quality. People must reside close enough to one another to greet each other in the flesh. Individuals living in close proximity form small village networks, create small parochial norms of behavior, cultures, and identities. If several villages are located close to each other, they may form a broader communicative community with overarching conventions, but these will likely be weaker given the greater frequency of interactions between individuals near than far. As a result, villages and townships become the primary social and political unit—small, isolated publics among countryside of many other small, isolated publics (Dewey, The Public 112). Further social developments spur the coalescence of broader identities by bringing once geographically separated communities into contact with one another—nationalism theorists suggest the rise of organized religion and intergroup warfare help to

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1 It was perhaps in these small communities that the idea of the Deweyian public was most fully realized—a small population means the indirect consequences of each individual’s actions are significantly more prominent, with fewer links in the chain of reaction and interaction. With more pronounced consequences comes a more distinct interest in controlling those consequences.
amalgamate parochial identities and communities (Anthony Smith 37-38, Anderson 12-19). Small groups become bigger groups as the people who comprise those communities come into contact with each other with greater frequency. Social developments, especially in pre-modern and early modern history, are the prime movers of people, generating larger and larger early formations of potential publics.

Perhaps, the most revolutionary expansion of the early modern individual’s communicative possibilities came with the rise of capitalist economies, a relationship meticulously analyzed in Habermas’ landmark treatise on the rise of civil society, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Early trade capitalism served as the engine of a new social order. The village marketplace, once governed by guilds and small corporations, transformed into a local base of operations with the introduction of long-distance trade—the functions of markets, hitherto dispersed across the numerous villages that dotted the countryside, were consolidated into regional trade centers where individuals from throughout an area came into contact with each other to sell their wares. The trade fair became the nexus of exchange of both commodities and information, creating “new commercial relationships” that would serve as the basis for new political changes appearing out of an emerging sense of the public (15). Next, I will broach the issue of how new means of communication, technology, helped facilitated public formation alongside social and economic developments by allowing new, despatialized forms of communication. Together, technological and social change helped developed the conditions that make the notion of a public coterminous with a state’s territory possible.
ii. Communications Technology and the Rise of the Public Sphere

“Invent the printing press and democracy is inevitable.”

—Thomas Carlyle

While the villager could expect to hear all sorts of gossip from distant towns at trade hubs, which brought together individuals who would have never crossed paths prior to the introduction of trade capitalism, the development of the public sphere is as much indebted to changes in the means of communication. Technologies offer an extension of the agent’s ability to act on the world—both a means to an end and an end in itself in Heidegger’s thought (Heidegger). Don Ihde, a later follower of Heidegger, calls technology’s embodiment of individual praxis, “an existential relation to the world” (Ihde 137). Technologies mediate the relationship between the individual’s subjectivity and the objective world, priming, intensifying, and defining subjective experience, and, in turn, these experiences come to define the user.

Without the aid of some sort of mediation, each one of us can only communicate so far as our voice can travel, and face-to-face interaction is thus the initial state of communication. New communications technologies—written language, signals, symbols, and so on—allow for messages to transcend their biological bearers, existing separate from them. Even technologies that have functions beyond the facilitation of communication have deep effects on the way individuals communicate and relate to each other. One need not go further than the introduction of the railway to America and the standardization of time zones to see this idea in action.

By expanding the possibilities of individual agency, new technologies extend the direct and indirect consequences of individuals’ actions. My spoken word is less durable, lasting, and accessible than its written form, and if those same words are mass
reproduced via a printing press, they can reach a much larger audience then I ever could on my own. On the flip side, technological developments allow individuals to be communicated with to a greater extent, whether they like it or not, and their life prospects to be conditioned by the actions of far off individuals (Dewey, *The Public* 98).

Vertical and horizontal technologies, what we might think of as one-to-many technologies (television, radio) and one-to-one technologies (mail systems, telephones), both have a role to play. The possibility of a public as coterminous with a political state’s territorial expanse is contingent on technology that allows a large group of geographically disparate individuals to communicate with one another, either through direct interaction or the consumption of similar information. Dewey writes, “Persons are joined together… because vast currents are running which bring men together. Green lines and red lines, marking out political boundaries, are on the maps and affect legislation and jurisdiction of courts, but railways, mails and telegraph-wires disregard them” (107).

The greatest breakthrough in communicative technologies since the written word, the printing press revolutionized the spread of information, both from person to person and from state to public. Coupled with the wide scale mobilization of individuals toward trade and urban centers, the mass production of the written word allowed for the development of a sort of proto-media, comprised mainly of political journals dependent on the individual exchange of information. Information once restricted to private correspondence and face-to-face interaction became increasingly public with the introduction of this fledgling journal culture, allowing for a sort of take-a-penny bowl of communication—with no particular communicant in mind, these journals directed themselves toward the public at large (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 21).
New forms of communication facilitated by technological developments, together with major demographic and social changes, allowed for the rise of a politicized civil society that could provide a powerful counterpoint to the state apparatus. As technology enabled societies to organize more coherently over greater distances, the private affairs of individuals—transactions and activities relegated to the household in ancient times—took on increasingly public significance, affecting more individuals in more apparent ways. Technological development promoted what Arendt describes as the rise of the social and what Dewey sees as at the core of the public. New means of communications meant that relevant developments that occurred far away could have profound effects nearby more quickly than ever. As information could be disseminated over greater distances, the public sphere moved beyond the city marketplace and a coherent civil society came into being.

Within this emergent civil society, individuals at once built a public consciousness—some individual awareness of the public as a public—and began to debate and articulate the political expression of the public. This great discussion emerged out of “the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple,” the idea that the individual wore a variety of hats (56). Meeting in salons and coffeehouses, citizens engaged in rational debate, and the personal “subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, [and] by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself” (51). This emerging public sphere served as the birthplace for communicatively generated power and active political engagement that directly promoted certain norms pertaining to political processes and institutions. Legitimacy gained its regulative force as public consciousness spread with civil society. The emergent media, as prefaced upon “social”
affairs in the Arendtian sense, facilitated this development by documenting ideas and reactions to ideas, thus expanding conversation.

Despite Habermas’ opposition to the dichotomy between the individual as property-owner and human being, the public sphere itself allowed for the communicative process that cemented these abstractions as coexisting identities each requiring specific behaviors and duties. As we have discussed, I may desire X or Y policy from my position as a property owner, but as a citizen, I may hold different views that conflict with my interests as a property owner—in legitimate debate, I must justify my reasoning on grounds accessible to all individuals, not merely personal ones. The public sphere, as a sphere of norm-generating communicative processes, has turned the fiction it was based on into a reality, at least in a behavioral sense, by creating norms.

One might argue that facilitating the conversion of fiction into reality, that is, creating commonly understood meanings of activities and roles to serve as the grounding of demands of legitimacy, is the end goal of a public. Kant argues the facilitation of dialogue within the public sphere allows for the scrutinizing of ideas, concepts, and laws in light of human reason, “The touchstone whereby we decide whether our holding a thing to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is therefore external, namely the possibility of communicating it and of finding it to be valid for all human reason” (Quoted in Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 108). In Kant’s mind, the public sphere facilitates the harmonizing of a multitude of individual consciousnesses with a transcendent human reason. While we need not ascribe to a Kantian worldview, this point suggests that by forcing individuals to express themselves in ways accessible to all citizens, discourse is increasingly pushed toward correspondence among many subjective perspectives. Mead himself suggests that reason, as an overarching interpretive frame,
cannot become impersonal until it takes a reflexive approach to the consciousness that yields it, recognizing itself as an object and thus extrapolating political aims toward a body of objects (Mead, Mind 138). Public discussion allows for citizens to place their ideas outside of themselves and into a broader social dialogue, allowing for the possibility of intersubjective understanding.

Starting with the Enlightenment, the normative demands on state action grew stronger as civil society expanded. As nations transitioned from monarchy to democracy or were built from the ground up, greater civilian engagement produced powerful formative effects on the shape states took. The communicative expansion facilitated by the growing media sets up Habermas’ two-pronged conception of the state, featuring an institutionally independent state apparatus coexisting with a robust civil society by allowing citizens to shape shared expectations on each other and the states that governed them. Further technological changes to the way individuals interacted have continued to transform civil society, making the indirect consequences of private interactions more salient and the ability to collectively grapple with those consequences easier.

Further technical and social developments have allowed for an even greater realization of the latent public in advanced democracies—the railroad, telegraph, radio, telephone, and finally the Internet, among many other technologies and innovations, have radically reoriented the communicative possibilities available to all individuals. These advancements have, quite suddenly, in the span of few hundred years, overcome huge expanses of space, allowing individuals separated by thousands of miles of mountains and ocean to consider themselves part of the same collective. In this sense, a public coinciding with the inhabitants of a state is a distinctly modern phenomenon, only made possible with advanced communicative technologies. As more and more
communication becomes technologically mediated, the issue of how the means of communication affect the nature of communication and social structures based upon communication becomes particularly pressing. Analyzing this issue will be my next task and will help return us to the online public sphere, as well as introduce the philosophical context of my main argument, that the structure of the Internet undermines communication’s public-constituting capacity.

**iii. Technology and “A New Age of Human Relations”**

Following the arrival of the printing press, the advent of steam in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, and electricity in 19\textsuperscript{th}, the resulting “the age of machines” led to what could be rightfully called, in Dewey’s words, “A new age of human relations” (\textit{The Public} 141). In terms of a public as a body that generates norms imposed upon itself and self-enforced, a greatly expanded realm of “human relations” results in more concrete norms applied back upon the members of a larger public. In the pragmatist mindset, where “education is the interchange of ideas,” greater communicative possibilities result in a greater interchange of ideas, greater opportunities for argument, counterargument, critique, and resolution (Mead, “Psychology” 38). The public sphere is thus expanded in its scope, allowing for a greater prevalence of discursive practice where individual subjectivity expresses itself objectively and is dialectically reinterpreted by the articulator and the interpreter. This, on its face, appears to be a very good thing.

However, the effects of technology are not so simple, and technologically mediated communication poses new problems. Face-to-face interaction stands as the initial state of communication, and the dialectical and self-dialogical quality of Mead’s understanding of communication stems from such communication where communicants’ reactions are
immediate and direct, their visual cues fully perceptible. Technologies fundamentally reorient the conditions of communication and our relations to others.

Technologies don’t simply exist, they are used, and how technologies are used is dependent on the attitudes and understandings of those who use them. Jacques Ellul notes, “With a knife one can peel an apple or kill one's neighbor… No matter how it is used, it has of itself a number of positive and negative consequences” (35). As we use technologies in certain ways conditioned by our social context, those technologies shape how we understand and interact with the world around us—we use and are used.

But, even when we aren’t using technologies directly, our world is one in which, as Langdon Winner says, “telephony, automobility, electric lighting, and computing are forms of life in the most powerful sense” (Winner 108). His language harks back to Wittgenstein’s maxim that “the speaking of language is a part of activity, or a form of life” (Wittgenstein 23), in that the use of technology is not separate from activity, but so interwoven with our life-experiences, that they constitute a fundamental part of activities themselves. The world without such technologies becomes unthinkable. Regardless of use, technologies influence intersubjective experience because of their very existence. Viewing them solely as tools neglects at once the moral inseparability of object and technique and, more broadly, of object and experience itself. Winner describes this fallacy as technological somnambulism, “sleepwalking through the reconstituting of human existence” (Winner 107). Thus, we would expect the tools of communication to shape how discourse brings about the intersubjective understandings that are so crucial to the public.

No thinker has articulated this better than Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who, after decades of derision and irrelevance, has gained newfound
significance in the digital age. “The personal and social consequences of any medium [of
communication]—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that
is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology”
(McLuhan 7). To McLuhan, “the medium is the message.” Technological means of
communication not only conditions how information is communicated, but the nature
of that communication itself. McLuhan’s maxims have important ramifications for both
one-to-many communications (the media, as it is usually defined) and one-to-one
communication (individual interactions facilitated by technology). The “new scale” of
communicative technologies introduces new conditions of communication: with the
elimination of space as a relevant factor, communication no longer requires visibility, and
by extension, identifiability. The removal of visual cues may affect how a certain message
is interpreted and thus that message’s meaning. Communicative acts, as understood by
the pragmatists, undergo fundamental transformations as their media change.

**iv. Recollecting Public Formation**

Democracies are, by their nature, diverse, vocal, and encompass a plurality of
wills. That democracies take on a wide diversity of functions, values, and structures
comes as no surprise. So far as every person born will be unlike every other person born
or yet to be born, the democracies that represent them are unlike their peers, ancestors,
and future descendants. Formal democratic institutions and the civil society they coexist
with are mutually interdependent, the characteristics of one necessarily affected by the
other. Though individuals may conceive of themselves as having different roles and
wearing many different hats—citizen and property owner, voter and mother, father,
daughter, or son—and may have different preferences depending on which hat they don,
they remain singular, indivisible individuals. As the engine of democracy, the events and experiences that occur within civil society will necessarily color those of the state apparatus.

To sum up the ideas developed over the past few chapters, the public, as a body of individuals that regulates itself through the enforcement and generation of norms of behavior produced through myriad small-scale communicative processes determines a normative framework within which a democracy functions. It takes a massive field of democratic possibilities, deems some legitimate, some illegitimate, some moral and some not so. Created like those norms governing life in small and highly-interdependent communities, these democratic restraints define democracy’s scope of ideology and ability to legislate while keeping it accountable to the values of individuals it represents, but also inducing individual citizens to practice good citizenship. Thus, public living is a sort of moral education resulting from the communication and interpretation of democratic norms in interpersonal interactions in civil society. Seemingly non-political chitchat has a potent democratic role—such fleeting interactions are the vehicle for the spreading and cementing of norms and values. The broad socialization procedures latent in social life determine civic habits that define democracies, and act as stabilizing elements while also protecting the moral content of democracies—they function as representatives or political expressions of the public broadly; a public-sense of morality facilitates this to a greater extent.

With the coterminous introduction of communicative technologies (the printing press and the means for the systematic dispersion of publically-relevant information) and socioeconomic developments (the rise of trade capitalism, the trade hub, and the city), individuals became able to communicate with more individuals farther away. The myriad
publics centered in the village or town began to coalesce, creating larger and larger
demands on states by the public. As Edmund Burke states, the expansion of the public
as a relevant political entity led to states’ perspectives “that general opinion is the vehicle
and organ of legislative omnipotence” (Quoted in Habermas, Structural Transformation 94).
With a technologically mediated communicative community having grown to the point
of its coinciding with the geographically boundaries of the state apparatus, the possibility
of the realization of a public becomes stronger.

However, a reliance on communication technologies comes with qualification—
not only did the printing press, the telegraph, the television change who was able to
communicate with whom, but also how they communicated. The latent quality of
visibility that was so crucial to developing a sense of accountability within
communication disappeared. The question now turns to the future of the public and
deliberative democracy rooted in the communicative processes of civil society. The
digital age has more or less obliterated the geographic boundaries and spatial dimensions
of communication. The Internet user’s communicative possibilities have exploded to
unheralded numbers, and, unsurprisingly, cyberspace has become a hotbed of political
conversation. Does the Internet offer hope for the Deweyan dream of an engaged and
self-reflexive public? This is the focus of the next chapters of this project.
CHAPTER VI
THE LIFEWORLD AND CIVIC INTERSUBJECTIVITY

i. Finding the Lifeworld: Intersubjectivity and Social Reality

Key to my argument so far has been the role of the public as a norm and legitimacy generating body which offers a communicatively produced shared schema for the organization and categorization of acts and experience as acceptable or unacceptable. Citizenship in any democracy requires shared understandings of conventions, rules, and practices, and that disparate individuals in a political association are able to tap into a socially and linguistically transmitted pool of shared meanings. The public, in this sense, exists against a backdrop of intersubjectivity in a broader sense, a massive network of social actions where individuals voice their inner subjectivity to others. These expressions of inner subjectivity, of course, need not be political in nature—I subjectively perceive that a book is resting on a desk, that the book is the color red, and that its pages have slightly yellowed with age. Others recognize the same thing, and we share an understanding of the objective qualities of the book. The totality of these shared perceptions constitutes what we might call a lifeworld, the horizon of intersubjective experience shared by all contemporaneous subjects within which exists the public, itself embodying shared political meanings. To best understand the Internet’s powerful effects on the way individuals relate to one another, it may be helpful to situate computer-mediated communication within a lifeworld constituted by way of social action.

Phenomenologists have long grappled with the fundamental question of how we come to understand the subjectivity of others attempting to make sense of the objective world we inhabit together. The question found its first answer in the work of Edmund
Husserl. “We may be conscious of the world as universal horizon,” he writes in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, “as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each 'I-the-man' and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this ‘living together’” (116). As subjects, we constantly confront and are confronted by the totality of objects and subjects, ourselves included, in such a lifeworld—the ever-shifting backdrop against which we make sense of the world and bestow objects, subjects, and our experiences with meaning. Although we only perceive the lifeworld subjectively, and it takes on distinctly personal dimensions, the lifeworld is not a purely subjective phenomenon, but due to the intersubjective accessibility of meaning through communication, also a universal one. For later followers of Husserl, such as Alfred Schütz, this background was the “common-sense” reality of shared understanding and meaning into which humans are born. Through socialization, the lifeworld—its definitions and structures—is generally taken for granted and constitutes the normal attitudes of those who live within it. But what makes such intersubjectivity possible? Schütz offers powerful insights for understanding social reality within the lifeworld, and his analysis is crucial for our coming to terms with the transformative aspect online networks have on the way citizens relate to each other to constitute a public.

We might conceive of two dimensions of the contemporaneous social lifeworld, direct and indirect social reality, or in Schütz’s words, the realm of consociates and that of contemporaries. Direct social reality is comprised of face-to-face social actions, which we might conceive of as the conveying of or drawing out of meaning to or from another subject. The people I speak to, shake hands with, and see walking down the street, all are
part of my direct experiencing of the social world—we share both a spatial (as is in I can see them or interact with them face to face) and a temporal community when we communicate. As a result of this spatial association, I can access an individual's full “field of expression”—tone of voice, body language, gestures, and so on, those non-linguistic cues that express meaning alongside language.

We form direct social and communicative relations with the individuals who constitute this social reality, though those relations can take on many forms. When I enter into a communicative relation, I either convey or interpret meaning from another subject in a reciprocal fashion. Three sorts of communicative relations can occur. [1] Two individuals might observe each other, drawing visual information from the other’s body language, appearance, and so on. [2] They may communicate with each other, expressing internal meaning, reacting to and integrating that meaning, and so on. Finally, [3] a situation might occur where one individual attempts to affect or convey something to another, while that individual may only observe. When a protester shouts a slogan as I walk down the street, he or she expresses a message to me, but I only observe, forming a one-way relation. [2] Thus, experienced social reality is filled with fleeting social relations where individuals garner information about those subjects who fill their surroundings via auditory and visual cues.

In a directly experienced social moment, “My Here and Now includes you, together with your awareness of my world, just as I and my conscious content [subjectivity] belong to your world in your Here and Now” (Schütz 142). It is only in

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1 Schütz discusses communication as the syncing of the subjective experience of time of two people, the intertwining of their individual “streams of consciousness” (102-103).
2 There may be a situation where someone observes me but I am unaware of their observation—this, while social, is not reciprocal, but simply an observation on their part. Such relations are not of our concern at the moment.
these situations of copresence that individuals come to develop a “subjective meaning-context” of the other, a scheme of expression and interpretation based on an awareness not only of the other’s objective activities, but the subjective motivations underlying them. We may obtain a sense of an individual’s biography, but more so, we gain an understanding of an individual’s interpretative and reactive frame through which she grasps the situation at hand (and perhaps similar situations). While I come to an objective or non-subjective understanding of another person’s actions by imagining myself in her situation and so categorizing them within my own lived experiences, a “genuine” understanding of another is constituted by the realization that “the other person’s subjective experience of his [sic] own action is in principle different from our imagined picture of what we would do in the same situation… [T]he intended meaning of an action is always in principle subjective and accessible only to the actor” (115). But the subjective meaning-context of an act comes to be accessible if “we have in view the meaning-context in which the [communicative or active] product stands or stood in the mind of the producer” (133). With directly experienced reality and the accessibility of expressive cues and simultaneity that come with it, we not only gain an understanding of the meaning directly expressed by communicative acts, but also the inner motivational frame of the actor who performed the act. Schütz describes entrance into a reciprocal state of such subjective understanding as a “we-relationship,” where each actor acknowledges the freestanding subjectivity and agency of the other (115). There exists a distinct confrontational aspect to such a relations, where the individual’s subjectivity is thrown into relief against the subjectivity of another. As described by Mead, I am forced to reckon and react to the communicative and non-communicative acts of the other when I enter into such a direct social relation, and thus acknowledge them as a subject in their
own right. This confrontation and articulation associated with direct social experience and we-relationships is key to the development of shared meanings for the pragmatists.

Indirect social reality exists outside of direct experience when actors share neither spatial nor temporal communities. This includes one’s predecessors and successors, as well as those contemporaries who are spatially separated from the individual. But while it is impossible for Schütz himself (a predecessor) or a galactic spacefarer (a successor) to be my consociate, I do have the ability to communicate with my contemporaries.

Indirect social reality exists beyond the communicative possibilities available to me at a given moment. Those with whom I do not share any sort of spatial or temporal community but who exist in a shared lifeworld comprise part of my indirect social sphere, and I reckon the existence of such individuals within my own subjectivity. This, of course, occurs in degrees. While I’m in Connecticut, I know my brother is in Massachusetts—though I generally have a strong understanding of his subjectivity born out of our many face-to-face interactions, I still can only conceive of him in quasi-simultaneity within my consciousness. But more pressingly, there may be individuals that I know exist only within the context of their objective meaning with no recourse to their individual subjectivity. When I order a pizza, I enter into a direct social relationship when the deliverer rings my doorbell. But, I know when I receive that pizza, other individuals were involved in the process of creating it—someone had to prepare the ingredients, put it in the oven, and so on. These individuals exist in my mind only abstractly, compartmentalized only in terms of what Weber calls ideal types.3 For

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3 An ideal type isn’t solely a mental category used in organizing abstractions, but also the range of normative associations linked to that category. In Weber’s words, “An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the
example, I don’t know anyone from Uruguay, but I acknowledge the type of person
*Uruguayan* exists and have certain normative associations with the concepts in my own
mind. My relation to contemporaries is entirely based on objective meaning and exists,
abstracted, within my own subjectivity. I may understand the meaning of such
individual’s acts—the cook puts the pizza in the oven—but not the subjective meaning
that underlies the act—what motivated the cook to do so. The individual exists only in
terms of their act, categorized solely by certain concrete characteristics they share with
others and removed of any subjective considerations that make them unique as moral
agents. They exist to me as less than fully concrete people, as I only project them to exist
given my own interior understanding and nothing more.

**ii. Abstracting the Public**

Here, we start to gain an idea of an enhanced notion of anonymity. Traditionally,
anonymity means simple namelessness—I may publish a poem anonymously, wear a
mask, or walk around a foreign city where I can communicate with no one and no one
can communicate with me. However, in the context of a Schützian paradigm, a more
nuanced understanding of anonymity arises. Anonymity, in this sense, is directly tied to
those objective meanings accessible and accepted as understood by most everyone.
Musicians play music. Uruguayans are from Uruguay. These categories enable us to make
sense of our indirect social reality, giving us means of organizing, describing, and
subjectively understanding the individuals that we only know exist and act in an objective

synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally
absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly
emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical construct* (“Methodology” 90). These
types don’t correspond with normative ideals (you do not have an ideal type of freedom
or good or evil) but with groups of objective phenomena sharing characteristics.
sense, but only abstractly. This process of typification, organizing abstracted persons in accordance to types, makes the scientific study of society possible, and allows for a distinct sense of regularity in our understanding of social reality. Thus, the picture of anonymity that emerges isn’t simply namelessness, but abstraction and typification in accordance with ideal types. In this perspective, the purely anonymous individual exists solely within the categorical (or conceptual) framework of the subjectivity of another, outside of any concrete social relation. To me, the pizza maker and Uruguayans exist in a state of anonymity, as objective units organized by type and objective characteristics abstracted from any subjective content I would come to understand were I to be in direct contact with them. I might exist in such an abstract and anonymous sense in the mind of some individual thinking of a university student, a New England Patriots fan, or another type I might fall into, my subjectivity reduced to my objective acts of attending classes or cheering for a Tom Brady touchdown (Schütz 182-184). Even when I only observe an individual, the window into his or her subjectivity comprised solely of sensory cues, they take on a physicality to me that represents them as agents with internal subjective processes. We are aware of them as existing in a meaningful sense outside of our subjectivity, not just within our own minds. Thus, anonymity is this condition of being classified in the subjectivity of others in terms of one’s objective properties and acts due to a lack of physical presence that would otherwise allow access to one another’s subjective meaning-context.

So what does this mean for the public? It would seem that the public is simply a portion of one’s indirectly experienced social reality, a collection of anonymous individuals who partake in a shared political system. As an American, I have a conception of the American public, but my day-to-day experiences infrequently take me
far from my university and my town. I don’t know anyone from Birmingham or Billings, but I know people from these places exist. They are anonymous to me, but we are members of the same public and lifeworld. The public, in this view, is an abstract conceptualization of the individual’s indirect social reality that coincides with her membership in a political organization. The conception of the public so far presented is distinctly personal, conceived of abstractly within the mind of the individual, but at the same time constituting the subjective frame of the individuals that comprise it. As a meaning-generating entity, it exists as a particular dimension of a lifeworld, a mechanism for producing civic intersubjectivity. But such a level of abstraction seems to weaken the concrete behavioral effects the public has on individuals—abstraction belies its realness. How could such a diverse and abstract body be able to realize itself in order to gain some agency over its own political expression?

What allows a public to exist in face of such overwhelming anonymity is the very direct communicative processes that constitute such communities in the first place. Overlapping direct social realities lend the public a concreteness and connectedness. The shared meanings and conventions that bind a public are the products of direct social relations existing within an indirectly experienced lifeworld. Although most members of the public are anonymous to me, because of an incredibly expansive network of communicative relations, we come to share certain political preferences, meanings, and identities shaped by the context we all act within. Indirectly experienced members of a public are typified in accordance with a shared subjectivity fostered by direct communicative relations. This separates the public from much of indirect social reality. Given that each interaction affects subsequent interactions ad infinitum, which in turn comes to define the normative content of the public, the public’s subjective
conceptualization and objective meaning are contingent upon direct relations in way that other concepts existing within indirect social reality—say, Bhutan or the Baltimore Orioles—are not. The objective meaning context of the public is entirely dependent on communicative relations occurring in directly experienced reality that produce intersubjective consensus of civic and social matters.

In rearticulating Schütz and Husserl’s depiction of the lifeworld, Habermas offers a particularly compelling conception that roots the phenomenological understanding in communication itself. While we exist together in a “coherent universe” of objects and symbols that we make sense of and ascribe meaning to through subjective processes, the shared aspect of the lifeworld requires that those inner meanings be expressed outwardly. The lifeworld in this sense is the reproduction of the meaning context of a society—the “common-sense” understanding and definitions of Schütz’s model are the products of the expressions of meaning made in communicative relationships within the lifeworld (Habermas, *Communicative Action*). The public, then, we might argue, comes out of an active commitment to this symbolic reproduction as opposed to an otherwise passive construction, a mini-lifeworld that produces a system of political expression that at once further shapes the symbolic lifeworld while changing institutional systems in accordance with those changes to shared meanings.

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4 Institutions themselves aren’t necessarily part of the lifeworld, but how they function is. Think of a hospital. Common sense suggests certain norms of action and procedure that go on within the building. Even the barest objective definition—a building where people go to receive treatment for ailments—is contingent on normative understandings. We assume hospitals are clean, careful, and methodical in their approach to care, but these are normative assumptions, not objective facts. I might experience shock when I discover a hospital in another country that doesn’t conform to the standards I assume within my own lifeworld. Legitimacy, a product of shared assumptions, meanings, and expectations constructed in the lifeworld, shapes institutions and the practices within.
iii. Technologically Mediated Reality: Social Relations Without Space

Technologies, as we have seen, have made this sort of self-regulating public-a-la-lifeworld possible in the first place by reorienting the conditions under which individuals communicate and thus are able to experience social reality. By expanding the communicative possibilities available to individuals, communications technologies from the printing press onward have facilitated the formation of a public coterminous with a state’s geographic boundaries and brought about a “new age of human relations.” In light of Schütz’s conception of social reality, Dewey’s grand claim about the profound social impact of machines seems to hold some water—communication is defined by both space and time, and their presence defines the nature of direct and indirect communication and the ontological conditions of both. The Internet as a realization of communicative technology’s despatializing tendencies finally obviates space in an experiential sense and stretches the necessity of simultaneity, allowing for what might rightfully be called a new, technologically mediated dimension of a communicatively-grounded lifeworld.

Schütz, alongside Thomas Luckmann, toyed with the idea of a mediated social realm, one not readily or naturally accessible, but potentially so given the aid of technology. Shanyang Zhao extends this logic to the Internet, suggesting a third realm of human relations where individuals communicate and express themselves from afar, only sharing a temporal community, and a distinctly elastic one at that (Zhao 97-98). As opposed to the face-to-face relations of consociates and the purely subjective reckoning of contemporaries, the Internet allows individuals to communicate in elastic-simultaneity with each other through face-to-device interactions. Online communicators are both consociates and contemporaries at once, their relationship defined by bodily distance and
the potential for intimate familiarity. The online phenomenon that Zhao calls “telecopresence,” the mediated communicative community between geographically distinct individuals, creates an entirely new experiencing of social reality, one characterized by both invisibility and immediacy (Dreyfus). To understand the novelty and importance of telecopresence, we must distinguish it from other forms of “telepresence.” I may watch a hockey game on TV from my living room as if I were present, hovering just above the passes and slapshots below—I experience spatially-performed actions from a remote location as they occur, suggesting an experienced social reality akin to Zhao’s conception of the mediated realm of consociated contemporaries. Yet, while I may be telepresent at the stadium the game is being played in, the players and fans aren’t telepresent in my living room. I observe their actions, but they have no way of observing mine—communicative technologies up until the Internet were largely unidirectional, providing opportunities for social observations, but not relations. Rather, telecopresence is the condition of communicants being in separate physical spaces but still being “in each other’s electronic proximity and capable of maintaining simultaneous contact with one another through the mediation of an electronic communications network” (Zhao 99). Unique to the Internet is that, once logged on, individuals are “copresen[t] everywhere at once” (McLuhan 248). They enter into a realm of individuals interacting under shared conditions with no pre-requisites for prior knowledge of potential communications. Like walking down a busy street, I know lots of people are buzzing about around me online—we share a communicative platform divorced from the necessity of space that defines the prior assumed platform of face-to-face interactions.
Well and good. At the level of abstraction we’ve been dealing on so far, one might assume that the interactions in this mediated realm of consociated contemporaries are no different from the interactions that occur among consociates. But as we discussed in the preceding chapters, the nature of communication is in part contingent upon the conditions provided by the means of communication. The ability to interpret the subjectivity of another via both the objective meaning-content of that individual’s words as well as visual and auditory cues are key to the ability to derive subjective understandings of one another, which in turn allows for a public to express a sort of higher level intersubjectivity that not only agrees about objective meanings but also about the normative content of symbols and situations. Schütz saw this occurring in the face-to-face interactions we have in directly experienced social reality, and Habermas built upon this grounding, seeing a community’s shared schemes of convention, norms, and meaning as born out of these communicative relations. The public, though abstract in nature, is rooted in concrete, direct experience and the communicative interactions that come out of such experience. But can a mediated sphere of communicative relations constitute the normative meaning-context of a lifeworld and its democratic expression in a way that non-mediated ones could? Can a mediated public sphere extend directly experienced reality so to enlarge and deepen public bonds and the life worlds in the ways other media expand indirectly experienced social reality? The first step toward answering this question is to examine how the Internet actually mediates communication—what are the conditions under which communication occurs in Zhao’s third realm?
CHAPTER VII
THE CONDITIONS OF ANONYMITY

i. Controlled by Code: Mediation and Architecture

A large body of literature in a variety of fields—sociology, psychology, political science—has focused on the effects of computer-mediated communication on how individuals come to relate and communicate with each other, and for good reason, as we will later discuss. But the very act of mediation is somewhat ambiguous. Thus far, many thinkers have acknowledged how the Internet essentially obviates space as a relevant factor in the way individuals interact by offering a new communicative platform operating under very different rules than real, geographic space. To elucidate the implications of this mediated sphere of social reality and to assess the kind of social relations that occur there, it will be helpful to determine the structural underpinnings of the Internet’s mediation of our social lives.

Of course, our lives are all “mediated” to some extent in real space. Forces often outside of any one individual’s control set the terms on which we live our lives, making some actions acceptable or unacceptable, attractive or unattractive, possible or impossible. Norms, laws, and the market all shape our actions by altering our rational expectations of performing actions—I can get arrested for setting fire to a public building, get slapped for propositioning a stranger, or lose money on a bad business transaction. Whether through formal or informal means, these forces limit us in our ability to freely act upon the world. Yet, such restrictive forces are all contingent on human activity: laws, norms, and (passively) the market are products of human action. Without people, they would not exist. But even then, there are limits to what we can and
cannot do. I can’t jump and go whooshing into space; gravity will pull me down. When I walk around in real space, supposing my eyes are working correctly, I can observe you and you can observe me. Such is the architecture of real space, the physical constraints, both natural and artificial, that determine how we experience and act upon the world around us. Architecture enforces its peculiar set of rules on how we go about our lifeworld-constituting communicative business in real time. And while it seems like something of an afterthought, architecture plays a very important role in our burgeoning conception of network-mediated behavior.

The Internet too has its own architecture—even as a metaphorical space, certain rules govern how we use it and the conditions under which we interact with others online. Lawrence Lessig calls architecture’s online analogue code:

> By code, I simply mean the software and hardware that constitutes cyberspace as it is—the set of protocols, the set of rules, implemented, or codified, in the software of cyberspace itself, that determine how people interact, or exist, in this space. This code, like architecture in real space, sets the terms upon which I enter, or exist in cyberspace. It, like architecture, is not optional. I don’t choose whether to obey the structures that it establishes—hackers might choose, but hackers are special. For the rest of us, life in cyberspace is subject to the code, just as life in real space is subject to the architectures of real space. (“Cyberspace,” 4)

It is true that “code is never found; it is only ever made, and only ever made by us” (Lessig, *Code* 6). Yet, unlike the other factors that define the limits of our actions, code-architecture requires “no human agency to be real” (133). We can choose to follow or break the law or to steal to escape the controls of the market. Yet, we cannot decide
whether or not a wall exists or a website is passcode-protected, unless we’re the owner of
that wall or website. Despite its constructedness, code presents itself as something
fundamentally objective to the user, something outside of their control that limits the
way they experience cyberspace. Lessig is particularly concerned with the malleability and
contingency of code and the dangerous potential to regulate the Internet by regulating its
code directly. This is not our concern here. Rather, I seek to explain how code regulates
the conditions of communication available to web users. The conditions of interaction
significantly affect what individuals communicate and how their expressions are
integrated by others. The way the means of communication shape the content of
communication inevitably changes the dynamics of the formation of the public.

We’ve seen that communication online is distinctly non-embodied. The code of
the Internet ultimately precludes the kind of identifiability we’re so used to in real
space—we see each other and are seen, and even if we don’t know the formal identity or
name of a person, we may access some objective qualities and visual forms of expression
that can help us identify that person. While on the subway, I see a tall man of about 65,
wearing a suit, riding with me. He’s slightly balding and has a sharp hook nose. I have
some sense of who this man is in a physical sense and can use those factors to identify
him later on if I see him again. I know nothing about him that isn’t sensory, but I can
still identify him as a singular agent. If he punches another subway rider in the face, I
know he is the actor who chose to take that action.

But in accessing the Internet, we lose the visual cues that allow us to link actions
and actors. Face-to-device communication strips communication of the need for space-
sharing and thus mutual observability. Code constitutes the mechanisms that allow for communication without sharing spatial communities. How the Internet is wired not only defines what acts we can or cannot perform, but also the experience of performing those acts. Though we need not make as strong a claim as McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,” we might say that the medium structures not so much the objective meaning of a statement, but rather how it is interpreted by divorcing that objective meaning from the subjective meaning underlying it.

For instance, a major selling point of the Internet among Internet optimists was the possibility of end-to-end communication. And while it sounds simple—two machines connected directly to each other over a network—the mechanism is crucial for our understanding of interpersonal communication. To drastically simplify the process, from the point of view of the network, the only relevant information attached to a message is the TCP/IP address indicating the machine from which the message is sent and the machine it’s being sent to. The protocol acknowledges nothing about the identity of the sender or the receiver, the physical location from where the message was sent, nothing about the content of the information itself. “From the perspective of the

1 But as I discussed in Chapter I, plenty of identifying information is still accessible. In using the Internet, individuals provide tiny clues to their identity by leaving a data trail of their locations, their interests, their occupations and so on. With the right filters, companies make significant profits by collecting the data trails we all leave behind—they may find information that tells them far more about the subjectivity of our hooked-nose subway rider than we can learn by observing him. His habits of viewing finance blogs and trade publications may tell us he’s a businessman, while his frequent purchases of fishing gear tell us he’s also quite the outdoorsman. His identity, as expressed in his online action, lingers on in the form of raw data left in his cyber-wake. Because of these data trails the notion of anonymity as a sort of absolute privacy from all peering eyes has become tenuous. Still, when we perform communicative acts online, we usually don’t have access to such information: we don’t know the faces of the people we communicate with or whether they’re dog people or cat people, mechanics or medical doctors. How can all this information exist online without overwhelming us, hidden underneath the Internet’s glossy surface? This is one of the great paradoxes of the online age, and it’s made possible by the power of code.
network,” Lessig writes, “this other information is unnecessary surplus. Like a
daydreaming postal worker, the network simply moves the data and leaves its
interpretation to the applications at either end” (Code 44). The result is a communicative
mechanism that strips messages of all meaning save for what is explicitly conveyed by
the sender.

**ii. Pervasive Anonymity: A New Definition**

The deliberate minimalism of the Internet’s design shapes the nature of the
communicative acts that it facilitates, which come to mirror that very minimalism of
form. The network itself, by the very nature of its core transmission processes, hardwires
anonymity into the experience of Internet use. As a result, those aspects of ourselves
automatically disclosed in face-to-face interaction—our sex, our approximate weight and
height, our estimated age, and even, to an extent, our emotional state, all key identifiers
(Chelune 2)—come to be objects under one’s own control. Our objective meaning
context thus becomes malleable, providing us the ability to selectively reveal details
about ourselves or fabricate details entirely. “Self-disclosure is the act of making yourself
manifest, showing yourself so others can perceive you” (Jourard 19). In a form of social
reality where no information is disclosed without the individual allowing it, we might
think of individuals as possessing total privacy. By the very nature of the code that makes
the web possible, individuals may reveal or construct their identity more or less freely, as
they are detached from any signifiers visible in real space that force categorization upon
them.
This issue of identifiability and self-disclosure, in the context of a Schützian paradigm, is particularly troubling. While we might communicate with our contemporaries as if they were our consociates in a mediated social reality, this comes with a fundamental change in the way we conceive of our social context and, ultimately, each other. Individuals, by nature of face-to-device relations and the code of the network, are entirely invisible to each other and have no access, at least in a communicative relation, to the objective and subjective meaning-context of others beyond what those individuals directly reveal to them. This is the crucial flaw of Zhao’s conception of a mediated third sphere of social reality and the crux of our understanding of online anonymity. When individuals reveal things about themselves to me, I still must come to understand them as if they were anonymous to me in real space. I organize those revelations in accordance with my own lived experience and categorize them in terms of the categories within my own subjectivity as opposed to seeing them as a distinct subjectivity in their own right. When communicating on the Internet, I cannot use the frames of expression that help me understand the subjective meaning-context of the actions of another. As with any text-based communicative medium, I only have access to the objective content of communicated words, missing out on non-verbal cues that reveal information about a message’s subjective motivations. The other individual exists in a purely abstract sense, within the mind of the user, like the anonymous pizza maker or Uruguayans. Even with proper identification, he or she exists to the user only as a mental construct with inference filling in the gaps left by that not directly expressed in a communicative relation. Even if I know my online communicant well, I still must assume certain factors of conversation in order to ascertain any understanding of their subjective motivation. And in doing so, I project myself and my experiences onto the
anonymous and invisible individuals I interact with online, and they do the same to me. We exist as less than fully concrete individuals to each other, their subjectivity only supposed as a subjectivity within my own mind, not as a separate subject in its own right.

On the Internet, this state of anonymity is simply the baseline, so that all users and all other potential communicants can be conceived only within the individual’s subjectivity. They are invisible, unknown, and abstracted in their entirety, millions of voices coming from all directions and no single source. As if the Internet community as one inseparable entity speaks to itself, I have no way of knowing the constitution of those I listen to and those who listen to me. I can only be certain of my own unity in the face of the mass of anonymous, invisible individuals that exist as individuals, actual people, abstracted and as objects within my own mind. We might think of the near universal condition of online communication as one of pervasive anonymity.

With this all in mind, we have a stronger framework of just what exactly the conditions of Internet anonymity are—far from the simple namelessness of anonymity’s semantic meaning, online anonymity is the pervasive condition of abstraction from the subjectivity of others that comes with non-spatial communication and a lack of identifiers of subjectivity and unity of identity. This phenomenon defines the experience of interaction online and suggests that, while a mediated social reality may not require space as a prerequisite for communication, it cannot separate itself from the objectification and abstraction that defines the realm of contemporaries. Online, we may communicate with these abstractions, but that does not change their inherent abstracted

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2 This totalizing anonymity of online communication extends other potentially anonymous forms of mediated communication, like print, to their logical extremes. The Internet constitutes a realm where all directly experienced interaction occurs under the conditions of text-based communication. Whereas when I read a magazine article or journal piece in real space, my relationship with the writer is indirect, my relation with my online communicants is a direct one, through construed as indirect.
quality. Such abstraction and anonymity prevents full engagement with the subjectivity of others, and thus prevents participation in a shared lifeworld by weakening the bonds through which individuals create and enforce meaning and values.

With this deeper understanding of Internet anonymity we can address the fundamental questions of this thesis—what does this all mean for the public sphere, the feasibility of a public, the shared meanings, values, and legitimacy such a public produces? Our notions of the public are grounded in interactions between individuals and what happens within these interactions. We’ve also seen what many scholars believed to be the democratic promise of the Internet within such a behavioral and communicative frame. But the problem is that the forms of interaction possible on the Internet are not the same as their analogues in real space. Under conditions of pervasive anonymity online, how does political behavior change? What is next for the promise of the public as citizens move into cyberspace?
CHAPTER VIII
THE NETWORKED PUBLIC AND ITS PROBLEMS

i. A Twofold Argument

To begin our analysis of how computer-mediated communication changes the public sphere, we ought to distinguish two distinct dimensions of public communication where pervasive anonymity radically subverts traditional expectations. Thus far, we’ve acknowledged two kinds of social actions, observational and communicative. One prong of my argument concerns the realm of observations, the seeing and interpreting of the phenomena one encounters when directly experiencing reality. We might broadly call this “social context,” the sensory circumstances of interaction that pertain to observation relations. The second prong concerns active communication within that social context, how individuals relate to and behave around each other while communicating. Over the course of this chapter, I will explain how the conditions of online communication subvert the role social context and personal interaction traditionally play in the formation of the public.

First, I will argue for the necessity of confrontation in social context and how individuals’ unanticipated encounters and observations help shape preferences and bring important social and political viewpoints to light. The Internet allows an escape from the sometimes uncomfortable otherness of social context, promoting selectively constructed abstractions of the public. Second, I'll broach the idea of accountability in interpersonal interaction, and how that accountability promotes both adherence to public norms of discursive behavior and legitimacy. In contrast, the Internet, by enabling disembodied and non-spatial interaction, allows for more uninhibited forms of behavior and self-
expression, which offers new avenues for discourse, but at the same time weakens social bonds crucial to the public. These two arguments seek to address the democratic implications of a public sphere increasingly reliant on online activity. What the Internet gives us is a startling paradoxical adjunct to the public sphere: in massively expanding citizens’ abilities to deliberate with each other, it fundamentally undermines the very public moral consciousness which gives democracy its communitarian content. Our increasingly networked public sphere is at once freer, less coherent, and, if left unchecked, more hostile to the promise of a unified Dewayan public. The communicative technologies that have brought citizens closer together than ever threaten to, at the same time, push them even farther apart.

**ii. Anonymity and Social Context: A Public Sphere for the Invisible**

*It’s hardly possible to overstate the value, in the present state of human improvement, of placing human beings in contact with other persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar.*

–John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*

Directly experienced social reality seems like a fancy word for a simple and familiar concept: that much of the time the individual is surrounded by other individuals, who constitute the individual’s social context. As I walk from a friend’s apartment in New York to a subway station, there are thousands of people making choices and performing actions around me. Sometimes I’ll see them, sometimes I won’t. Sometimes they see me walking along the sidewalk. This is not a particularly revelatory idea, but it does hold significance for building functioning and expressive democracy.

As we’ve discussed, the public sphere is that realm of action where individuals identify and discuss common problems, develop views and juxtapose those views against
the opinions of others, and, ideally, engage in thoughtful debate that tends toward rational agreement on shared symbolic meanings and normative frameworks. Let’s hone in on the idea of juxtaposition for a moment—individuals encounter ideas and experiences that run contrary to their own, and, in engaging with them, come to greater intersubjective understandings and develop viewpoints aligning with a more holistic conception of society. The public sphere is a realm of confrontation and foreignness, and that fundamental otherness is crucial for developing a shared normative framework that embodies the public good and mutual recognition among citizens.

But confrontation in the public sphere is not and should not be purely communicative—in the simple acts of observation, we encounter others whose behavior we must interpret within our own subjective frame, holding up our own understandings and experiences against the objective realities we see in front of us. Observational and lived experience, like communication, aids in the identification and understanding of social problems. Imagine the mass protest or the union strike, visual expressions that highlight political or economic issues. Demonstrations are expressly observational—one need not be involved to understand their significance, a protest’s mere presence being a manifestation of discontent over a perhaps more abstract issue such as wealth inequality, civil liberties, or unjust war. But these observational experiences need not be so ostentatious. When I walk to the subway, I’ll likely have to see any number of homeless men and women, and while I may avert my eyes, a response to uncomfortable visual stimuli, I cannot unsee them or pretend I did not. I must integrate the observation into my own subjectivity, whether I wish to or not.

To legal and political theorist Cass Sunstein, such harsh realities are democratic boons: “people should be exposed to materials they would not have chosen in advance.
Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself… they are important partly to ensure against fragmentation and extremism, which are predictable outcomes of any situation in which like-minded people speak only with themselves” (Sunstein 6). These confrontational experiences, when occurring in a range of social contexts, become shared experiences—to return to the example of homelessness, any person who has spent a few hours outdoors in a major metropolis has likely encountered the unpleasant reality that many people, due to any number of factors, are unable to house themselves and must find refuge on city streets. The distinctly systematic issue of homelessness, under the assumption that most people who are homeless did not choose to be, gets rooted in shared experience rather than pure subjective abstraction.

Danielle Allen provides a startling example to this end of confrontation in her discussion of a photograph of a young high school student on her way to her first day of school. Her name was Elizabeth Eckford, the first black student to attend Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas following the Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education banning school segregation. Surrounded by a mob of white men and women hurling slurs and calling for her to be lynched, the picture of Eckford clutching her schoolbooks instantly struck a nerve and, to this day, remains chilling. Allen writes:

“It rendered visible democracy’s ‘public sphere’ as it existed in 1957… The photo forced a choice on its US viewers, and its power to engage the imagination lay in this. The picture simultaneously recorded a nightmarish version of a town meeting and, by presenting to a broad public the visible structure of segregation, elicited throughout the citizenry an epiphanic awareness of the inner
awareness of the inner workings of public life and made those mechanics the subject of debate.” (5)

The importance of dialogue in the public sphere is to throw the individual’s preconceived opinions and views into juxtaposition with the views of others, and, in integrating and responding to the criticisms and differences of others, to come to more rational and public-oriented conclusions. Observations operate in the same way, forcing us to reform our individual views in light of the realities we witness. The observational confrontations with others that occur in real space are, in the Schützian view, social relations and, for our purposes, crucial deliberative acts. The Internet negates the possibility of observational relations by removing any visual stimuli from the citizen’s social context. I no longer have to “hear the civil rights marcher, take a leaflet from a striking worker, or see the unwashed homeless person” (Shapiro 126).

But more so than simply removing visual cues, the Internet weakens the deliberative content of social context by radically increasing the level of control that the Internet offers over one’s social surroundings. While I may be able to look away, I generally am unable to choose what I observe or who communicates with me in real space. We may only choose whether to communicate back. The communicative acts of others are largely out of our control, and thus we may be forced to reconsider our views when we enter into public space whether we wish to or not. The public and the moral consciousness it embodies are contingent on our lack of control over the random

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1 While this lack of visibility is true of most mediated forms of communication, and the Internet may allow images to be seen and shared with far greater ease, what sets the web apart in this regard is the issue of choice. Unlike a newspaper or a nightly newscast, I can choose which pictures and videos I see rather than being confronted by them. The issue of choice is one of the main subjects of this section.
encounters we have with other views and social realities. These chance events form the basis of a public’s shared experiences.

But the Internet offers a civil society injected with the power of control over what the user confronts and what they do not. Berkman Center Fellow Andrew L. Schapiro writes, “Increasingly, we can use interactivity and flexibility of the Net to customize our intake of information, our products, even our social interactions. We can, in a sense, become masters of our domains” (44). In a purely economic sense, choice is simply control over which objects, services, and information we access. While grocery shopping, I’m confronted with several varieties of ketchup, and I will choose my preferred brand, as it will make me happiest. Such is the fundamental logic underlying capitalism.

Information is no different, even prior to the Internet. We choose which newspapers and magazines we prefer, news programs, radio shows and so on. Niche media services crop up at a surprising rate, offering a huge variety of choice over the views we are exposed to when consuming media. Take Sharon. She is a foodie with a penchant for animal rights, fast cars, and Asian affairs. She will seek out information on these subjects, tuning in to cooking shows or Top Gear. She will perk up when a nightly news program mentions animal testing or Chinese political developments. Sharon maximizes her utility by choosing which information she consumes.

This same logic affects social interactions. While I can’t necessarily control who communicates with me and whom I observe, I can largely choose whether to communicate back or not based on who is communicating and what is being communicated. Sharon prefers speaking and engaging with her close friends more so than her coworkers or strangers, and is more likely to respond to a friend’s call than an anonymous dial from a political campaign. She will be more open with her close friends
than her mere acquaintances and avoid discussing subjects to which she is apathetic or averse. The Internet, some might say, is simply an extension of this sort of control, offering a huge variety of news sources to draw upon and individuals with whom to communicate.

But while we might think of choice as generally positive, the availability of information and communication has a profound influence on democracy, throwing our control over information into a new light. While we might think access to information and communication would expand and refine our political opinions and bring a public into being, the massive amount of information and communicative possibilities available online (and off) has a paradoxical effect. Niche media actually foster a narrower conception of the world and produce communities where that narrow conception builds upon itself. The Internet facilitates such polarization at an alarming rate by entirely replacing the confrontation of real space with total control in cyberspace. Anonymously experienced reality is one we can shape to seem friendlier and more accommodating, where everyone seems to agree with us—but too much of a good thing promotes factionalism and moves a citizenry farther from the promise of the public.

An example dealing with choice of mainstream media outlets will help introduce some of the major points of this argument. In 2006, Stanford Professor of Communications Shanto Iyengar and Richard Morin, director of polling for the Washington Post, sought to test the viability of the net as a “marketplace of ideas” where individuals would confront a variety of opinions and perspectives. Presenting subjects of a variety of political persuasions with a several identical headlines randomly attributed to several different sources—Fox News, NPR, CNN, and the BBC—Iyengar and Morin looked to find whether individuals preferred news reports from sources that affirmed
and were compatible with their personal beliefs. The results confirmed the pair’s suspicions. When confronted with identical headlines, Republicans were inclined to find reports attributed to Fox more convincing, Democrats those attributed to CNN or NPR (Iyengar and Morin). Even as the content of a message stayed exactly the same, indicators of the political leanings of the source changed individual’s perception of that message. Individuals not only preferred reading those news sources that confirmed their beliefs, but they saw them as fundamentally more convincing or reliable. The findings point toward a sort of feedback loop, where individuals confirm and reconfirm their preexisting perspectives, further entrenching them in certain ideological frames. Public Policy Polling’s annual TV News Trust Poll has shown similar results since its beginning in 2010. In 2013, 70% of Republican’s trusted Fox News while 15% did not, and 72% of Democrats trusted PBS while 11% did not. Democrat’s trusted Fox’s most direct liberal analogue, MSNBC, by a ratio of 58% to 19% not trusting (Jensen). While Dewey was adamant that access to increased information helped bring about the possibility of a public and would see it into fruition, the massive wealth of information available seems to undermine the public’s realization.

The underpinnings of what we might call selective information access, or, more strongly, selective perception, stem from the idea that information that conflicts with our own ideas prompts not reconsideration but a deaf ear. When an individual holds two opposing cognitions—be they emotions, values, or ideas—they experience a sense of discomfort that prompts any number of responses to resolve the tension. In psychological literature, this is known as cognitive dissonance. In a pair of 1967 studies by experimental psychologists Timothy Brock and Joe Balloun, the researchers presented subjects with a simple scenario: a radio playing faint, static-ridden broadcasts, which
subjects could clarify with the push of a button. The kicker: the participants had particularly fixed views on certain subjects—the first experiment featured committed churchgoers and presented them with broadcasts that either criticized Christian values or supported them. The follow-up study focused on cigarette smokers and used a variety of broadcasts condemning the habit or declaring it harmless. In both cases, individuals let the static take over when the radio broadcasted information that conflicted with their personal views, and pushed the button to clarify messages that reinforced their preconceived beliefs (Brock and Balloun). The mechanism for resolving the dissonance was simply to cut out or ignore information that conflicted with any preconceived opinions. The crux of the experiment lay in the possibility of control; individuals could choose whether or not they clarified the message by pushing the button. They had little control over the stimuli they were presented with, but full control over its listenability and thus the need for them to integrate it. When able, individuals simply tuned out countervailing opinions. According to Brock, Balloun, and the many scholars following in their footsteps, humans are hardwired to seek out information that reinforces their initially held views.

The democratic potential of the public sphere is to counteract this tendency. As a place of free expression, individuals are inevitably confronted with information that they can’t simply tune out. When I walk past something that prompts some sort of interior dissonance, I can’t simply push a button and make it disappear. I’m forced to observe and acknowledge it. In public space, our ability to control social relations is limited and so we may be forced to resolve the dissonance between what we see and hear and what we believe, refining and informing our views while developing perspectives that incorporate the good of public as a whole. The common experiences individuals share in
public space define the very norms of legitimacy necessary to a flourishing democracy.

But as we transition toward an increasingly networked public sphere, the code facilitating that very networkedness allows us to be control freaks, to select our information sources from a massive array of possible choices and cherry pick our social relations. This control over our virtual “context,” over our relations and information sources, is particularly problematic as the public sphere, ideally a realm of conflict and resolution, becomes self-selectingly harmonious, as individuals deliberately or subconsciously choose information that backs up their own beliefs rather than challenging them. In the words of Robert Putnam, “Real-world interactions often force us to deal with diversity, whereas the virtual world may be more homogenous, not in demographic terms, but in terms of interest outlook” (Bowling 178). The possibility of the sort of confrontation occurring in space-based communities is weakened as virtual interest communities gain in prominence.2

2 What’s even more troubling is the Internet’s trend toward making those essential choices of what information we consume and relationships we enter into for us. Eerily reminiscent of Benkler’s argument against the Babel attack, the Internet increasingly relies on algorithms within the code of its major hubs, such as major search engines, instead of social networks to help the user sift through the immense quantity of information online. The idea of a self-personalizing Internet is not a new one, arguably beginning with MIT Media Lab founder Nicolas Negroponte in 1995. “Imagine a future in which your interface agent can read every newspaper and catch every TV and radio broadcast on the planet, and then construct a personalized summary,” writes Negroponte in Being Digital. “This kind of newspaper is printed in an edition of one… Call it the Daily Me” (Negroponte 152-153). Take our friend Sharon: her “Daily Me” culls restaurant reviews and articles on Asia from around the Internet—given her past preferences, a computer predicts her future ones, and filters through the massive wealth of information available to provide her with exactly the kind of content she enjoys without any need for her to actively choose it. Today, many of the highest-traffic websites have taken Negroponte’s dream of pre-personalized news to heart: sites like Google and Facebook collect data about how users use their sites in real time to personalize user experience, tailor advertising toward them, suggest information sources the user might like. “The perfect search engine,” Google co-founder Larry Page often said, “would understand exactly what you mean and give back exactly what you want” (Google). The code of the Internet may end up increasingly choosing for us, a thought
The result of this newfound control is the fundamental reorientation of publicness itself—dissonance-averse control mechanisms push individuals toward ideologically uniform groups grounded in a narrow but shared interpretive frame. Journalist Farhad Manjoo calls this phenomenon “The New Tribalism,” Sunstein, “echo chambers.” We seek out people like ourselves online just as we do off. And while offline interest groups or communities are nothing new, the emergent balkanization of the net is, and its effects are dangerously novel when combined with web’s totalizing anonymity.

So what happens when groups of people with shared opinions seek each other out and deliberate amongst themselves? Sunstein points to a 2005 study out of Colorado that asked ten groups of six, five composed of individuals with initial liberal leanings, the other five conservative, questions on same-sex marriage, affirmative action, and global warming. Each individual participant was asked to anonymously provide their opinion on each issue before and after fifteen minutes of group discussion. The results were polarizing, literally. After their brief deliberations, liberals were largely more supportive of civil unions, affirmative action, and climate change legislation. Conservatives were much more strongly opposed to all three. Before the discussion, there had been a significant degree of diversity of opinion within each group. Not so afterwards. Similar polarizing tendencies have been seen in studies dealing with discussions of issues of feminism, anti-Americanism among French citizens, racial prejudice, and voting patterns of Republican and Democratic judges (Sunstein 61-63). Instead of moderating individual opinions by synthesizing them with the criticisms of others, such narrow deliberation has the same polarizing feedback loop effect as politicized niche media.

echoing Rousseau’s classic dictum, “there is no more perfect form of subjection that the one that preserves the appearance of freedom” (Emile, Bk. II 82).
Evidence suggests three underlying mechanisms for this polarizing tendency. The first is simply a limited argument pool—in deliberation, individuals hear a variety of arguments and the evidence that backs those arguments up, synthesize them, and come to new conclusions. In an ideologically narrow group, a disproportionate number of arguments will be directed in one direction, and few opposing arguments will be offered. In such a case, individuals are more likely to move from their initial inclination toward the majority direction (Sunstein 65). The second involves the individual desire to be accepted by others and to avoid offending or disparaging their peers. We might think of this as a question of social control on a much smaller scale—individuals will avoid crossing boundaries to avoid the negative repercussions of transgressing majority opinion. Such is the major drawback of social control-based behavior regulation versus the internalization of an overarching moral community based in reciprocity and recognition. Rather than constricting democratic behavior as a whole even within small groups, the small groups develop an even narrower behavioral framework that limits expression as opposed to promoting it. That is the central mechanism of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s theory of public opinion, which holds that minorities slowly silence themselves out of fear of ostracism from the majority—“a spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann). The third mechanism, well documented in experimental psychology, shows that people tend to be more confident, and thus more extreme in their opinions as others corroborate the same view. The more “others like me” agree with a certain point, the more likely I am to agree with it (Baron et al.).

While all three contribute to the polarizing tendencies of groups, the last points toward one of fundamental problems of anonymity and control. Social reality, as we’ve discussed, involves confronting issues and opinions that run contrary to our own, which,
over time, helps develop more publically oriented political positions and to solidify norms of legitimacy. While I may think that felons should forfeit civil rights when they commit a crime, when I sit next to one on a plane or a bus, I’m forced to reckon with their opinion and experiences if they make that part of their identity known. My ideal type of the felon, an unrepentant criminal set on causing havoc, is thrown into a new light when I encounter one who has paid for their crime and is attempting to make a new life.

Public activity and public space help promote ideal types consistent with reality and the perspectives of others as opposed to whatever uninformed gut reactions we might have. This idea is deeply rooted in the logic of pragmatist epistemology, that the “true” and the “real” result from investigations that are undertaken by everyone working together. Pierce, the founder of the pragmatist school, eloquently argues, “Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion” (300). The true comes out of a coherence of thinking and experience. If all individuals, given their experiences, both in terms of scientific inquiry and the day-to-day, can come to the same conclusion without contradicting those experiences, then the conclusion is true according to the pragmatist theory. For William James, “any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally” (Pragmatism 58). The ideal of social scientific inquiry is to unite abstracted ideal types as closely with experienced reality, the “instrumentally true” world, as possible. The public, by way of its juxtaposition of the lived experiences of its members, strives toward this goal as well, using the basis of “true” ideal types to
construct meaningful and publically oriented political preferences. The pragmatists saw that “True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify” (201). The public can be seen as the political extension of this view of truth, the realm of action and communication in which we juxtapose our ideas and experiences with those of others, leading to agreement on the instrumentally true. This is of course, only a cursory analysis of pragmatic theories of truths relation to the public, but they serve to highlight the problems with the insular, polarizing interest communities that rise in place of the public online: what sort of real verification can occur when individuals are likely to corroborate no matter what?

By rendering individuals anonymous and bestowing them with near complete control over who they observe and interact with, the Internet obviates this self-questioning so necessary to building a publically-grounded and truth-oriented democracy. Individuals choose social relations that minimize cognitive dissonance, and in doing so, build communities that, instead of being grounded in a diversity of lifestyle, experience, and opinion, are increasingly narrow. Agreement far outpaces disagreement in such communities (Gilbert, Bergstrom, and Karahalios). Inevitably, this narrowness leads to polarization by reaffirming biases as opposed to questioning them. Here lies the fundamental issue—while discourse seeks to clarify, verify, and test truth, ideologically fixed communicative communities fracture it. They produce competing conceptions of the “real” basis of political preferences by failing to contrast information from competing perspectives.

A frequent and extreme, but telling example comes out of 9/11 conspirator communities. Few moments of national tragedy have been so well documented as the crash of United Airlines Flight 175, caught on camera and tape by innumerable
professional and amateur photographers. And while it might seem like common sense that less information leads to more ambiguity about a certain event—take the myriad theories surrounding Aaron Zapruder’s video of the assassination of John F. Kennedy for example (Posner)—the massive speculation surrounding the events of September 11th seem to suggest otherwise. Theories of what exactly happened that fall morning abound throughout the Internet, many of them supported by a wealth of pictures and video. But people see different things—some missiles, some planted explosives, most just mass murder. These perspectives are divided by the question of fact. Zapruder’s film revealed “to create a shared truth, a single image isn’t enough,” while 9/11 showed that thousands of haunting images aren’t enough to “bolster agreement about what’s actually happening around us” (Manjoo 64-66). Close-knit communities that shared the view that the U.S. government and its 9/11 commission hid or concealed information that contradicted official reports began developing their own “truths.” Similar perspectives worked toward shared, but not universally held facts. For Manjoo, this trend suggests that “Reality splits, and then split reality spreads. We think that what we see in pictures or what we hear on tapes gives us a firm hold on fact. But, increasingly, the pictures and the sounds we find ourselves believing may only be telling us one version of the truth” (78).4

While his claim is certainly provocative, if we see rational and focused inquiry based on experience as the heart of determining truth, then the issue of Internet

4 While much research has been devoted to how online communities tend to polarize views and foster internal agreement, the claim that high levels of Internet use produce cloistered thinking and that democracies with such high levels of use tend to be more polarized or have fractured belief systems has yet to be rigorously tested. However, given the tendency toward polarization seen in small-scale studies, this idea that Internet use is related to polarization may serve as a fruitful hypothesis for future research.
balkanization might actually pervert the ability of sharing experience to clarify truth and fact.

The formation of ideologically homogenous groups grows even more problematic when we couple the polarization and “truth” building communicative processes within these groups with the Internet’s inherent scheme of anonymity. We’ve discussed the discursive formation of what individuals often consider to be fact, even when the fact itself is grounded in merely reiterated singular claims, and is not supported by evidence. This process need not be related solely to events, but the very substance of our political preferences, the ideal types with which we order and categorize indirectly experienced social reality and the public itself. Part of the underlying goal of a deliberative democratic scheme is to create normative schemes and legitimacy that form ideal types in concordance with truth from which just political processes can take root. The public, though abstract and subjective in nature, must be grounded in the experiences of the myriad individuals who compose it and the communicative interactions among them through which they share those experiences. When the range of these experiences and perspectives narrows and their holders are removed from physical realms where they might encounter observational or communicative relations that contradict those initial opinions, the public’s ability to generate a shared moral awareness is considerably weakened. The possibility of civic moral education considerably lessens as public morality fragments into ideologically incompatible factions. The result, perhaps, is a reversion to forms of social control as the public’s dominant regulatory mechanism rather than moral education itself. I will pick up this point again in more detail in the next section.
For now, we have a two-pronged problem of ideal types online. On one hand, increasingly polarized discursive communities arise and help crystallize pseudo-truths that are opposed to the pseudo-truths of other groups. On the other, as individuals come to rely more on anonymous Internet-facilitated communication and less on communication in directly experienced social reality, they inevitably depend even more upon these faulty images or ideas to form their political preferences and judgments. A public with the goal of unifying these images or ideas across its constituents through the communication of shared experiences disappears. Truth fractures into fictions as the individuals who would otherwise discursively clarify facts become increasingly self-segregated. As individuals move away from publicness and toward small, narrow “echo chambers,” and abstract typifying takes the place of direct social relations, this call for common definitions becomes fainter and fainter and the role of abstraction in developing political beliefs grows even larger.

Thus, the very capabilities that allowed for a public coterminous with a political state possible—subjective abstraction and society-spanning dissemination of information—paradoxically weaken the public, undermining the very phenomenon Dewey and Schütz saw them facilitating. Increasingly anonymous discourse, the complete and total kind hardwired into the Internet, coupled with a massive array of information and the tendencies hardwired into our own brains, subverts the normative ends of the public sphere, cementing disagreement rather than promoting moral convergence.

How to mitigate the polarizing effects of online group dynamics and orient the Internet’s connectivity toward the public good will be one of the goals of this project’s final chapter, but for now, we have only assessed one side of the anonymity issue, the
individual’s relation to the rest her community. Social reality is composed of concrete social relations and interpersonal interactions. Psychologists and political scientists are quite comfortable discussing the traditional modes of these interactions—two or more individuals, talking face-to-face—in relation to democracy. But what about when there are no faces, no cues, no voices, just words? Pervasive anonymity not only affects how we with interact with groups, but also how we interact with other individuals.

**ii. Anonymity and Interaction: The End of Accountability?**

“The ideal journal could, to be sure, be written only by people who join incorruptible honesty with rare knowledge and still rarer power of judgment… but, above all, anonymity, that shield of all literary rascality, would have to disappear. It was introduced under the pretext of protecting the honest critic, who warned the public, against the resentment of the author and his friends. But where there is one case of this sort, there will be a hundred where it merely serves to take all responsibility from the man who cannot stand by what he has said… Often enough it is only a cloak for covering the obscurity, incompetence and insignificance of the critic. It is incredible what impudence these fellows will show, and what literary trickery they will venture to commit, as soon as they know they are safe under the shadow of anonymity.

—Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature*

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was never known as a particularly jovial or agreeable fellow—his philosophy was dark, confrontational, and earned him as many enemies as it did allies. In his writings on literature, Schopenhauer saw the opportunity for the expression of great genius, but noted it required a commitment to braving the reactions of others—removing oneself from ownership of one’s words by writing anonymously was shameful. “For a man to wrap himself up and draw his hat over his face, and then fall upon people who are walking about without any disguise—this is not the part of the gentleman,” Schopenhauer writes, “it is the part of a scoundrel and a knave” (179). Anonymity, in this case, meant the ability to criticize without being
criticized in turn, to Schopenhauer, a sign of cowardice and dishonor. Individuals needed to be *accountable* for their actions. Without the possibility of accountability, critics became “literary rascals.”

This idea of action without accountability is nothing new. In *The Republic*, Plato’s brother Glaucon pressed Socrates to imagine an artifact, the Ring of Gyges, that rendered the wearer invisible and thus entirely unaccountable for his or her actions:

“No one… would be so incorruptible that he would stay on the path of justice or bring himself to keep away from other people’s property and not touch it, when he could with impunity take whatever he wanted from the market, go into houses and have sexual relations with anyone he wanted, kill anyone, free all those he wished from prison, and do the other things which would make him like a god among men.”6 (Bk. II, 360b-d)

When one could do anything without fear of recourse from the law or his or her peers, the question of justice became moot. In Glaucon’s mind, the veil of impunity would cause individuals to act however they saw fit.7

For both Schopenhauer and Glaucon, anonymity and invisibility are tied directly to the notion of accountability—the ability to attribute a certain action to an actor, and, in

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6 The Ring of Gyges bears much similarity to J.R.R. Tolkien’s One Ring, an artifact of overwhelming evil that granted the wearer great power (including invisibility) and corrupted them entirely. Tolkien’s creation, however, has less to do with the lack of accountability and more with the insatiable lust for domination of its Ainur forger, the Dark Lord of Mordor, Sauron (Tolkien).

7 Socrates, however, disagreed with the notion that all humans would act in such ways while wearing the Ring of Gyges. The moral education of a philosopher king would cause him to value justice and ethical action above his or her own desires regardless of anonymity. I will return to Socrates’ response to the Ring of Gyges in the conclusion of this project as I try to find a how we might maximize the public benefits of the networked public sphere.
turn, to make demands upon that individual to justify her action in hope of preventing its recurrence. Accountability, in this sense, plays many roles—in democracies, institutions are accountable to the voting public or international agreements, a bank accountable for its financial actions, and so on—and can take several forms depending on who or what is being held accountable. Our concern here, is, like Schopenhauer and Glaucon, interpersonal accountability—how individuals, as citizens and peers, are answerable to others for their social actions.

In this section, I will analyze how the Internet changes the conditions under which individuals account to each other and the subsequent effects these new interpersonal dynamics have on behavior in the public sphere. Online, we’re invisible and anonymous, conditions seemingly at odds with accountability. How do they affect our ability to hold others to account, and, in turn, what does a lack of accountability hold for the public? In the minds of Glaucon and Schopenhauer, anonymity meant impunity and release from inhibition—how can individuals account to each other, or believe themselves to be able to be held accountable, under the conditions of anonymity the Internet provides? Does the networked public sphere foster a new strain of “rascality”? Or perhaps a more open public dialogue? The answer, as we will see, is both. Drawing on psychological and philosophical accounts of behavior, I will assess accountability, or lack thereof, online and the effects of such a lack on the citizen within a deliberative democratic context. The picture is perhaps a more ambiguous one than that of the issues discussed in the previous section: the Internet stands as a Ring of Gyges, rendering all users entirely invisible and anonymous to each other. And while chat rooms and comment boards are rife with the deviant “trolls” Glaucon might expect to see there, they’re also filled with individuals less encumbered by the constraints of the public. New forms of political
expression and ideologies, once hemmed in by the accountability latent in social control mechanisms, arise, individuals share things they normally wouldn’t, and we see a new public arena for discussion arise: one more beholden to the cognitive biases of the individuals that enter it, but less accountable and less coherent, and in some ways more free.

Before I begin my analysis, I hope to determine what accountability is and why it is important to democracy and public-formation in the first place. By understanding accountability’s role in political life and the effects it has on action within the public sphere, the consequences of anonymity will become clearer.

The word “accountability” stems from the Old French term _acont_, meaning to reckon or to count in terms of money owed to another. There is a distinct calculative connotation of the word, as well as, in English, a narrative dimension. If we remember back to Mead, we may think of conduct as determined by the mutual interpretation of the actions of the other and a reflexive awareness of oneself as the subject of another—a dialogical narrative of sorts based upon rational or normative expectation. Both actors are calculative agents in this sense, basing future actions upon the prior reaction of their partner, their expectations, and the desired outcome of their communicative act. We can tease out two elements of the action—“he forms an intention under the influence of reasons for acting, and he produces behavior pursuant of that intention” (Velleman 190). But if that behavior violates some expectation on part of the other—be it a public value, an established norm, or simply something the individual finds shocking—he or she may call the other individual into account, to divulge the intentions that motivate that act (Semin and Manstead 21). To hold one accountable is to first identify the individual as the agent behind a certain act or expression and then to demand explication and
justification of that act’s motivations. If one’s responses to these demands fail to satisfy others, the agent in question may face negative reactions (informal means of control) from their peers. You make a pass at a barfly’s girlfriend, and, unless you can explain yourself, you might experience a knuckle to the face. You make an unsavory joke that shocks your company, you will be called upon to justify the joke or apologize, lest you be burdened with the label of having bad taste.

Being able to call others to account for their expressions and actions is crucial in the public sphere. In a political scheme where deliberation is paramount, the dialogue between the logics of political positions is crucial. If democratic deliberation is to examine, juxtapose, and synthesize a variety of competing perspectives, then the ability to draw out the reasons for a certain claim—say, an increase in military spending—is as integral as the claim itself. Supporters must offer reasons for the claim—I see national security as a prerequisite to a strong economy, rivals are modernizing their military at an alarming rate, and so on. Deliberation requires accountability as it requires citizens to press each other on their views, to ask each other “why?” Shared understanding and meaning creation are dependent on revealing the motivations behind expressions. If an individual regularly refuses to explicate their positions or provides explanations others find unacceptable, perhaps justifying positions solely in personal terms, then they may be sanctioned by informal means of social control. Deliberation requires people to own up to their positions and defend them when called upon to do so. The ability to call others into question for their positions is a prerequisite to deliberative democracy itself.

With the development of a public and a shared moral framework of legitimate political positions, this accountability takes on a new importance. Individuals in the role of citizens help form expectations and norms of conduct and expression for the public
sphere through consciousness-forming mechanisms and thus are accountable to each other for acting within that frame. Here we see a sort of mutual accountability among citizens arise, each person responsible for following these deliberative expectations. Citizenship requires a sense of responsibility, the duty to follow the norms that citizens themselves deliberatively construct. Mutual accountability to the norms and values of the public codify normative constraints into limitations on behavior and expression that allow for a coherent public.

However, this is a double-edged sword. Mutual accountability among citizens is inherently limiting, constraining what points and positions are valid and invalid, and prompting forms of informal punishment when certain expressions violate norms. While this mechanism allows for coherent, community-oriented political discourse, it also prevents certain forms of expression as well as the vocalizing of dissenting viewpoints that might help expand and refine public opinion. Thus accountability affects both the content of expression (the political points made) and how those expressions are made. In the first case, we might think how judgments of the superiority of one ethnic group over another are precluded from the American public sphere. But on the same hand, extreme, but still relevant points, like views that argue capitalism is incompatible with democracy, are similarly precluded. Revolutionary or reform-minded perspectives may be excluded from the public sphere even if those views may have an ultimately positive effect on democratic functioning. Similarly, the expression of certain identities can be marginalized in the public mindset. The persistent estrangement of homosexual and gender non-conforming in some political circles remains a reminder that the public sphere is not always as inclusive as it might reckon itself to be. Such pressures may result in the troubling trend of individuals, in attempting to avoid being held accountable for
their views, will silence themselves when among others who do not share their views, the crux of Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory.

Similarly, mechanisms of social control and accountability prevent certain means of expression from being considered legitimate. In our discussion of deliberative democracy, we discussed how political positions had to be justified on grounds accessible to all citizens—my argument that I as an individual will be better off with a system of universal healthcare in place is not acceptable, but an argument that healthcare is a human right would be. In terms of the public this is a good thing, in that we force ourselves to justify political views from the perspective of the public itself. But, by the same mechanism, important political considerations based upon nonrational motivations may also be excluded. Iris Young suggests that certain forms of communication, such as drama, rhetoric, and irony, as well as positions prefaced upon affects and emotion, while having valuable political input, are excluded given norms of rational argumentation. Where the public sphere of the 18th century was “wild, playful, and sexy,” Young argues the prioritizing of rational argumentation in the modern public sphere has a dominating effect (383-388). The public, in this sense, is a fundamentally conservative institution, offering the freedom of self-determination of legitimacy but at the expense of broader expressive freedom and a plurality of identities and moral frameworks. In cases of both content and expressive form, we see the constraining public as a stabilizing, if dominating mechanism. William James argues, “Habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative influence. It alone keeps us within the bounds of ordinance… It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life along the lines of our early choice” (Principles 79). Stability and public-mindedness are crucial for any advanced democracy, but they come at the serious cost of expressive freedom.
With an understanding that accountability cuts both ways, the next step will be to determine the mechanism of accountability. Once the conditions of accountability have been outlined, I will apply our developing model to the online sphere. To start, we might say that interpersonal accountability requires what Stephen Darwall calls a second-person standpoint, “the perspective you and I take up when we make and acknowledge claims on one another’s conduct and will,” situated within the normative frameworks constituted by a public and grounded in the we-relationships of directly experienced social reality (3). There are three essential mechanisms that make accountability from such a second-person standpoint possible: [1] visibility, the ability to identify an act and its author; [2] punishability, the means to sanction the author for the act in some way; and finally, [3] normativity, some framework within which individuals can determine what actions violate expectations and subject their authors to sanctions. All of these together allow for individuals to hold others accountable and to see themselves as accountable for their actions.

The first is perhaps the most straightforward, though the word visibility may be misleading. “Accountability requires visibility in an epistemic sense,” not so much requiring direct observation, but rather “information and understanding,” the ability to identify actions and corresponding agents and effects (Borowiak 7). While much institutional accountability discourse is filled with issues of transparency and asymmetric access to information, the greatest accountability issues arise when the effects of an act are not visible or when the agent behind the act is not. Accountability without a target isn’t accountability in any sense—what justification can be given or sanction levied if there is no known agent behind an act?

Punishability is often used synonymously with accountability, a testament to its
importance as a factor in accountability—in the words of Craig Borowiak, “without the possibility of sanctions, accountability processes are empty. The nature of public wrongdoing may be known, but unless consequences for that wrongdoing are applied, truth may merely abet impunity” (7). Throughout my discussion of law, social control, and the public, the notion of consequence, both predicted and unanticipated, has been crucial. Punishability means the ability to direct consequences toward an agent for their actions. When individuals are asked to account for an action, there is a latent threat of punishment if the individual refuses to offer an account or their explanation continues to violate whatever framework the accounting person seeks to impose. When I make a rude remark to a friend, they may ask for an apology, lest their opinion of me drop and I potentially lose their friendship. By violating my friend’s expectation, I am held accountable, the threat of a sanction requiring me to change my behavior or suffer some consequence.

In his seminal exploration of responsibility, *Punishment and Responsibility*, legal philosopher H.L.A. Hart discussed personal responsibility as fulfilling duties attached to certain roles: “whenever a person occupies a distinctive place or office in a social organization to which specific duties are attached to provide for the welfare of others or to advance in some way the aims or purposes of the organization, he is properly said to be responsible for the performance of these duties” (212). Key to this formulation is the

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9 Though not originating with him, the idea of associating punishment with the failure to meet certain expectations or obligations finds one of its most cogent articulators in Nietzsche, who saw the threat of punishment as integral in the development of humanity’s ability to make and break promises. Denying the natural existence of a “neutral subject,” Nietzsche argued the memory of punishment brought about the idea that individuals were responsible for their actions. In order to avoid pain, individuals came to monitor their behavior and act in accordance with social expectation (45). In Nietzsche’s mind, the threat of punishment gave accountability relations their formative and regulative effect, defining the way individuals interacted and the bonds they formed in public life.
understanding of certain normative expectations of behavior: as an agent in role X, person A should act in a certain way. This entails that a framework within which actions can be judged as valid or invalid is necessary for accountability. In Bovens’ words, “answering for something means answering accusations. However, there can be no accusation without norms and values” (28-29).

The Internet, however, by making discourse anonymous, breaks down interpersonal accountability, opening the possibility of a freer, if less coherent and stable public sphere. Accountability requires two distinctly spatial elements—visibility and punishability—and the Internet, by obviating space as a communicative prerequisite, fundamentally undermines the individual’s ability to hold others accountable and to be held accountable by others. The problem of non-spatial accountability is directly related to how individuals account to each other in the first place. With a distinct conception of the concept of accountability in place, I will next discuss the process of interactional accountability itself. With that in place, we can carry our model of accounting process to cyberspace, unveiling the impossibility of true accountability online and, from there, discussing how a lack of accountability affects individual behavior and expression as well as trust among citizens. The resulting picture is a convoluted and somewhat incoherent one. Individuals trust each other less, but given the freedom from consequence that comes with wearing a networked Ring of Gyges, are more forthcoming and expressive, in ways that both promote and damage the possibility of a public.

Locked up in normativity is the idea of the individual’s authority to make a demand on the behavior of others to conform to a certain scheme or face sanction. In public life, individuals “inevitably make demands on one another,” especially pertaining to conduct within normative behavioral schemes (Dewey, “Factors of Morals” 284). But
not all demands are created equal. Darwall writes, “Making a claim or a demand as valid always presupposes the authority to make it and the duly authorized claim creates a distinctive reason for compliance” (Darwall 11). While in official contexts authority may come from legitimate legal or political institutions, the authority that allows regular citizens to call each other into account requires “a distinctive kind of (normative) reason for acting… grounded in… authority relations that an addressee takes to hold between him and his addressee” (4). These reasons draw their persuasive influence by appealing to bonds of mutual recognition between the demander and the object of the demand—as is the case in the Schützian we-relationships, each individual recognizes the other’s status as a free and reasonable actor, a second-person standpoint. Given their origins, Darwall describes such reasons as “second-personal reasons.” Such reasons can refer to the demanding individual solely (saying “you’re hurting me!” when someone puts you in a headlock) or to the addressee’s membership in a shared moral community (the slightly more cumbersome “we understand each other as people who legitimately demand others not to put us in headlocks”). Both situations imply a sort of respect for membership of broader group and recognition of humans as, in the words of John Rawls, “self-originating source[s] of valid claims” (546). More pressingly, however, the appeal to group membership suggests the violation of a shared norm both the person accounting and the person accountable must respect. These group norms give actions meaning in that they set the expectations for when multiple actors when they interact.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) This authority via recourse to shared membership in a moral community is what separates accountability from mere desirability. To P.F. Strawson, the desirability of demands on the conduct of others was not “the right sort” of reason for calling out the behavior of another (72, 74). Accountability gains its authority from moral frameworks that exist outside of either the individual accounting or accountable, while desirability solely draws upon the individual making the demand. The authority of desirability is only as strong as the respect the acting individual has for the individual being acted upon.
Surprisingly, Darwall points to Adam Smith, intellectual godfather of market capitalism, to elucidate the social importance of shared expectations. Capitalism, to Smith, is merely a system of “fair and deliberate” trades among consenting individuals, a distinctly human phenomenon—“nobody ever saw a dog make fair and deliberate exchange of one bone for another with another dog” (Smith 26). The outlining of certain behavioral expectations make specialized relations like capitalism possible by tempering action in certain socially conducive ways. Harking back to Mead, concepts such as trade and property only have meaning so long as an affirmation of a concept “calls out a certain set of responses which must be the same” among members of a community valuing that concept (Mead, Mind 161). Mutual accountability to collective or community norms, in this sense, is the underlying behaviorist component of legitimation—not only do we see certain institutions or actions as legitimate, we set expectations for behavior based upon that legitimacy.

Thus, a new picture of publicly-conscious deliberation emerges, where we view the public as a sort of moral community that sets expectations for behavior when expressing points of view dealing with legitimate political institutions. We discussed before how deliberative democracy required citizens to account for their expressions, delivering arguments as to why they take this or that position. This is an example of a third-personal reason, a certain act’s relation to fact or value outside of the moral community. But this demand itself is prefaced upon the second-personal reason that, as members of a public holding deliberation in esteem as a mechanism for creating shared normative frameworks of legitimacy, we ought to share in the underlying arguments of our positions. Mutual accountability to these norms defines the public and serves as a source
of authority when making demands upon each other. Mechanisms of visibility and
punishability take effect when individuals fail to meet demands for third-personal
reasons or when the expression itself violates public norms. In turn, the accountability
mechanisms that promote deliberation allow for the generation of norms, legitimacy, and
shared normative frameworks for democratic expression.

Now, we see that all factors of accountability, visibility, punishability, and the
authority that comes with recognizing each other as free and competent members of a
shared normative community have their roots in Schütz’s we-relationships. They require
recognizing individuals in their objective sense (as the agents behind acts and agents
capable of being punished) and subjective meaning-context (as conscious, thinking
individuals who draw upon third-personal and second-personal reasons when choosing
to perform certain acts). For accountability to exist, distinctly spatial mechanisms must
exist—the necessity of seeing and being seen in order to identify the actor, an
embodiedness associated with punishment, and the closeness that allows for the
conceptualization of the individual’s subjectivity as members of a moral community.

Here lies the fundamental issue the Internet poses in terms of accountability: how
are any of these possible in a communicative sphere that is distinctly non-spatial? The
short answer is that they’re not guaranteed. Visibility (now better referred to as
identifiability given the primacy of face-to-device relations) is no longer a given condition
of communication, and, as a result, is subject entirely to personal control. In real space,
the actors behind individual actions are usually fairly obvious. We see the protestor
protesting or doomsday evangelist proselytising. These visual cues allow us to determine a
sort of unity of actor and action in physical space—we can tell, at least within our
immediate proximity, who says what or does what, and the context in which those
actions occur, offering a gateway to the intersubjective understanding of intentions and action so integral to Schütz’s we-relationships. Accountability is latent in real space—we need not know anything about an individual save for their doing of an act to hold them accountable. Physical proximity and presence implies accountability.

The Internet subverts this assumed condition of real space: inherently anonymous, individuals only need identify themselves as actors behind expressions or acts if they choose to or in ways that are non-binding, like alterable pseudonyms. This prevents the possibility of determining the exact identity of the agent. Anonymity and the selective self-disclosure/self-creation that comes with it allow individuals to bend the unity of identity assumed by informal means of social control, weakening the two aspects that make accountability to shared norms meaningful, and in turn, undermining the very creation of those shared norms by stripping them of their regulative abilities.

This is perhaps what Schopenhauer was getting at: anonymity, as total invisibility and accountability are largely incompatible, and, when individuals are not held accountable for their actions, they can act with more impunity. Anonymity gave rise to “literary rascality” because under its veil, individuals could act free of consequence, unable to be identified in the first place. This suggests a distinct link between anonymity and behavior—without the ability to identify, judge, and sanction anonymous behavior, the enforcement mechanism for norms and behavioral expectations disappears.

Social psychologists have long sought to explore how the condition of anonymity affects the decision-making processes of the individual. One of the first and most compelling answers to the question came from a classic experiment on the streets of Seattle, Halloween night, 1975. Researchers found that masked or otherwise unidentified Trick-or-Treaters were far more likely to take sweets or loose change from candy bowls
when instructed not to but unsupervised. In cases where children arrived in groups and remained anonymous, over 57% of children transgressed some expectation, either taking more candy or money than instructed, up from 20.8% when those groups were identified. When Trick-or-Treaters arrived alone, 7.5% of identified children violated instructions, while under conditions of anonymity, that number nearly tripled to 21.4% (Diener et al. 181).

The effect group presence and anonymity had upon transgressive behavior affirmed an idea that had been floating around social psychology circles for some time at that point, an idea called deindividuation. Philip Zimbardo and Floyd Ruch describe the phenomenon as “a complex process in which a series of social conditions lead to changes in perception of self and of other people,” resulting in “behavior that is normally restrained and inhibited is ‘released’ in violation of established norms of appropriateness” (702).

The most cogent account of the actual psychological mechanism behind deindividuation comes from the work of Steven Prentice-Dunn and Ronald Rogers, who sought to build upon the earlier findings and theories of Diener. Much of the focus prior to Diener had been on external input variables associated with deindividuation—anonymity, lessening of responsibility, subjective arousal, and so on—but puzzlingly enough for social psychologists, “not infrequently, investigators have demonstrated that deindividuation manipulations produced disinhibited acts without producing a subjective deindividuated state” (Prentice-Dunn and Rogers 503). Essentially, individuals often remained in a state of full self-awareness, but committed acts that did not seem consistent with such a frame of mind. They ignored their internalized moral considerations.
In attempting to reconcile empirical discrepancies and theoretical framework, Prentice-Dunn and Rogers suggests a bifurcation of self-awareness along public-private lines. “Public” self-awareness concerns “attention to oneself as a social object,” and how one is perceived by others, while private self-awareness involves the individual’s inner territory, their emotions and perceptions. Deindividuation as a mental state only occurs when factors reduced private self-awareness, but agents could partake in deindividuated behavior while maintaining private self-awareness if “antecedent variables such as anonymity and diffused responsibility decreases concern with evaluation of oneself by others” (Prentice-Dunn and Rogers 504). The crux of this was a reduction in “accountability cues,” the ability to be held accountable by others. “Exposure to accountability antecedents altered public self-attention but failed to influence private aspects of self-focus” (510). An individual could maintain awareness of a normative framework and deliberately choose to violate it under conditions where they were not identifiable and thus not punishable. In such situations, the shared authority bestowed upon members of a shared moral community is considerably weakened, and the second-person standpoint prefaced on such authority and accountability relations loses its regulative force.

In terms of this analysis, the expectation stands that individuals will make subjective consideration public through their communicative acts, at once forming and informed by the public. Private self-awareness is crucial for deliberation—individuals must have things to say—but the act of communicating that private self to others, what Prentice-Dunn and Rogers would consider a social act, is even more central. Accountability relations promote certain forms of communicative acts in accordance with values and social expectations. Thus, the issue of decreasing public self-awareness
through the weakening of accountability and authority relations of the second-person standpoint is of considerable concern.

Now, the conditions of anonymity necessary for public disassociation aren’t easily attainable in communicative relations conducted in real space—at first, the introduction of print technologies, as Schopenhauer noted, allowed for it to occur on a more widespread, but still limited scale. Dewey didn’t pay mediated anonymity much attention: communicative relations, in his mind, occurred face-to-face, and the technological mediums that facilitated anonymous communication were largely centralized in the mass media. The Internet has changed all that. Pervasive anonymity is the norm online.

And while the maintenance of anonymity does lead to public disassociation, there’s also some evidence that even when individuals choose to disclose essential identifiers, name being the most salient example, the effects of disassociation may still hold. An identifiable individual may act as if he or she was anonymous online, which suggests a further development in the argument thus far: if we remove the condition of total anonymity, we may not necessarily remove the condition of perceiving ourselves as such. Even when identifiable, a lack of shared space can lessen the strength of authority and accountability relations between individuals, maintaining the problematic public disassociation effect seen with anonymity.

An increasingly large body of research argues for the importance of social presence in communication. Inspired by science fiction writer Isaac Asimov and first articulated by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie in their 1976 book *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications*, social presence theory, at its core, argues that communicative media have varying levels of “presence” based on their capacity to host nonverbal modes of communication alongside verbal cues. Users feel greater warmth
and involvement with fellow users of media that host more cue systems—
communicating via video feels more involved than via telephone, which in turn feels
more involved than simply text-based media (Walther 445). This makes much sense
within our given frame: Schütz sees we-relationships and genuine subjective
understanding as requiring access to an individual’s full “field of expression,” all the
emotive and motivational cues that express not only action and communication but also
the reasons behind them. Cues are essential to intersubjectivity and aid in establishing
second-personal perspectives that maintain the normative boundaries of the public
through accountability mechanisms. A lack of cues, on the other hand, would have the
same sort of deindividuating effect, making communicative relations seem less than fully
real and having few to no consequences as compared to more cue-heavy forms of
interaction. The deindividuation mechanism remains, though in a more relaxed form.

The issue here is that even when individuals are able to identify actors and acts,
their ability to recognize others as free and competent subjects and thus achieve second-
person standpoints necessary for accountability is severely hampered. Here, we return
the flaw in Zhao’s conception of a networked sphere of social reality: even when
individuals communicate online exactly as they would off, the element of confrontation,
of seeing the other as outside of the self, is gone. We conceptualizes the subject of our
communicative participant within our own subjectivity in accordance with whatever
categories we’ve developed to make sense of abstracted others. We project ourselves
onto abstracted others, leading to the interpretation the communication and action of
others not as the actions of subjects in their own right, but as constructs of our own
subjectivity. The communicative partner becomes “a character within one’s intrapsychic
world,” as opposed to a freestanding agent. John Suler describes this phenomenon as
“solipsistic introjection,” and likens it to a conversations unfolding within an individual’s imagination. “In this projecting of voice, and along with it, elements of one’s self, into the other person’s text,” he writes, “the conversation may be experienced unconsciously as talking to or with oneself, which encourages disinhibition. Talking with oneself feels safer than talking with others” (“Disinhibition” 323). This is problematic in that it casts other subjects as objects in communicative processes ideally rooted in mutual recognition of subjectivity. Even when identifiable to others, the identifiable individual can only reckon those others as projections of their own psyche—their authority relation to the actor is considerably weakened, as they exist as something less than full, free persons to the agent. Even when individuals identify themselves, consequences seem distant and others more abstract, leading to a diffuse sense of accountability emerging out of a perceived distance from the presence of others.

All of this leads us toward a more conclusive understanding of the conditions of interpersonal interaction online—individuals, by being disassociated from the condition of directly experienced social reality, are unaccountable so long as they choose to be. Even in the case of full self-disclosure, accountability is considerably weakened and, as a result, so too is social control’s ability to regulate behavior. The psychological effects are profound and the behavioral consequences of such conditions are all over the Internet. With the disinhibition brought about by undermined accountability, individuals are free to behave as they so choose—this can be both a boon and a burden to the richness of the public.

Unfortunately, unaccountable speech often becomes ugly. Everyone online can be a critic, but with the constraints and ethics that defined public criticism and debate in the public sphere and mass media weakening or disappearing altogether, this may not be a
good thing. For example, in 2009 English comedian Stewart Lee made the effort to collect statements made about him on social media platforms and comment sections, and, while Lee acknowledged his thick skin, many of those were downright unsettling. Comments ranged from the simply abusive:

“I hate Stewart Lee with a passion. He’s like [child murderer] Ian Huntley to me.”
– Wharto15, Twitter

“I hope stewart lee dies.”
– Idrie, Youtube

To the disturbingly violent:

“One man I would love to beat with a shit-covered cricket bat.”
– Joycey, readytogo.net

“He’s got one of those faces I just want to burn.”
– Coxy, dontstartmeoff.com

“I hope the fucking chrones disease [sic] kills him.”
– Maninabananasuit, guardian.co.uk (Adams)

In political contexts, the picture is no prettier. During the 2012 presidential race, supporters on both sides released torrents of hateful speech against their political enemies. Violent threats made on Twitter and other communicative platforms against both President Obama and his challenger Mitt Romney resulted in multiple arrests and media outcry. Many citizens discussing either candidate in hateful, violent, or racist terms utilized their real names when posting giving credence to the Prentice-Dunn and Rogers deindividuation model. Individuals consistently attempting to goad others into emotional responses with provocative and inflammatory comments are regularly labeled “trolls,” while others partake in “flaming,” communication defined by its persistent, aggressive, and acutely targeted nature (Joinson 64-65) But these only represent the most visible and ostentatious of uninhibited activity—some suggest such instances are simply more memorable than benign comments, and thus create an “illusion of universality” (Lea et al.). But the fundamentally changing conditions of online discussion nonetheless
promote communication that is less hemmed in, even when it doesn’t take on such ugly forms. Individuals explore subjects they normally wouldn’t, express interests or sentiments that would transgress norms of acceptability in the physical public sphere, and reveal things about themselves that they would otherwise keep to themselves (Suler, “Disinhibition” 321). These need not be deliberately malicious like the acts of “trolls”—they’re products of conditions of lessened accountability and disassociation that are more or less inherent to online interaction.

But this isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Under these same conditions, individuals reveal views that would normally be stunted by the limiting capacity of “the spiral of silence.” They may reveal “secret emotions, fears, wishes. Or they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity.” (Suler, “Disinhibition” 321) Popular websites like PostSecret allow forums for individuals to anonymously share things about themselves they would feel uncomfortable sharing otherwise. In his seminal work The Virtual Community, optimist Howard Rheingold argued that, “In some ways, the medium will, by its nature, be forever biased toward certain kinds of obfuscation. It will also be a place that people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms.” (Rheingold 12) John Suler similarly suggests that online disinhibition can lead to new expressions of the “multiplicity” of the individual’s identity and “even give people the chance to express and explore facets of their identity that they do not express in their face-to-face world” (“Identity” 455-456).

Especially for individuals with identities usually marginalized in real space via mechanism of social control, the expressive freedom begot by anonymity allows for these citizens to enter civic dialogue and express their views without fear of recourse or
further marginalization. A pioneering study by Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh provides an excellent example to this end: the pair saw that online groups for individuals with stigmatized but easily-concealable identities, such as drug users, homosexuals, and people enjoying BDSM, created more opportunities for social support, and their members felt less marginalized as a result (“Coming Out” 686). Increased participation and value placed in these groups was closely linked to increased self-acceptance and reduced feelings of social alienation (688-89). These increased feelings of acceptance for marginalized identities have important implications for forming more inclusive publics by increasing the presence of those identities in civic dialogue.

Nissenbaum’s initial optimism that “Anonymity may encourage freedom of thought and expression by promising a possibility to express opinions, and develop arguments, about positions that for fear of reprisal or ridicule they would not or dare not do otherwise” is not wrong and represents the positive flip side of the anonymity issue (“Anonymity” 142). Social control is inherently constraining, as is the public, and anonymity, while weakening the ideological coherence or pseudo-coherence of political communities, also offers increased freedom to explore views outside those boundaries.

iv. The Problem and Prospects of Pervasive Anonymity

Ultimately, the normative result of anonymity is rather ambiguous. As we move toward extremes of anonymity, freedom comes at the expense of community—the public itself is a means of collective self-definition, a mechanism for groups to control the forces that define them, and while individuals certainly gain a greater degree of

12 However, in McKenna and Bargh’s study, the same correlation between participation and self-acceptance was not nearly as strong for ideological identities or fringe political views (691).
personal and expressive freedom, this expansion of the acceptable content of communicative acts comes with serious qualification. Here, we might tie the two strands of our argument, disassociation from social reality and from other individuals, back together. The public comes together out of the massively interconnected effects of each individual’s action—to restate the words of Dewey, “the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of those consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others” (The Public 12). On one hand, anonymity greatly expands the number of actions we can take without fear of negative repercussion—we can express points we normally wouldn’t and express ourselves free(er) of the demands of others. But, on the other, the fundamental mechanism of how these singular actions can change public consciousness, through the myriad effects our actions have on the perspectives of our peers, is undermined by the self-selecting “tribalism” that comes when we’re free to choose those who immediately surround us.

Often, we preach to only our own particular choirs when we’re online. Even when we feel less inhibited, our actions only have an effect on the limited group we’re interacting with. When a street corner evangelist steps up on his soapbox, everyone who walks by, whether liberal, conservative, sports fan, or dog-lover, has to integrate his actions into their own subjective perception. People of all stripes who share a physical proximity are exposed to the same phenomena, however dissonant they might be. This commonality differentiates a spatially located public from the interest communities that crop up online and allows for singular acts to take on great collective significance. When our expressions affect only those who think just like ourselves, those expressions do not strengthen the public or lead to changes in our shared normative frame. Rather they
fragment our collective understandings of meanings and values, driving them farther apart. The very crux of deliberative democracy—our ability to influence each other as a collective whole—shifts in favor of deliberative factionalism.

Anonymity offers great potential for individuals to define themselves, but the publicity of individual action is necessary for group self-definition. The new forms of communication the Internet creates have powerful beneficial effects on democratic life, but these advantages come at the cost of the individual’s ability to shape the lifeworld he or she shares with others. In the minds of pragmatists, deliberative democracy was a means for individuals to engage directly with the creation of intersubjectively understood meaning and to shape that meaning and the institutions reflecting it in ways coherent with public values. The Internet, instead of bringing the constituents of a state closer together in their intersubjective dealings, pushes them farther away from each other.

So is the arrival of the Internet the end of the public sphere and the promise of the public as we know it? I say not at all. As I conclude this project, I hope to argue that the Internet and the new communicative opportunities that come with it can help facilitate the public so long as increased online engagement is met with a corresponding increase of participation in the offline public sphere. My argument should not be considered a condemnation of the Internet, but a word of caution on an overreliance on its communicative channels and their effects on us as citizens. Troubling is the possibility of growing online participation and communication coming at the expense of the benefits of traditional public life. But if the Internet can breathe new life into our civic dealings in real space, there may be hope for the realization of the public yet.
CHAPTER IX
CONCLUSION: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN A DIGITAL AGE

The pervasive anonymity of the online world is dangerous, threatening the moral and communitarian underpinnings of democracy as the Internet becomes a greater and greater platform for civic discourse. At the same time, the Internet has the ability to revitalize our democracies, but it cannot do it on its own. Throughout this project, I’ve argued that the conditions of communication brought on by the net inevitably have a deleterious effect on our behavior and self-conception as citizens enmeshed in a public, but suggested that those same conditions provided relief from the marginalizing pressures of social control. As I conclude my analysis, I wish to explore a more hopeful picture for the future of networked democracy that I’ve until now only hinted at by finding a balance between the anonymity of online lives and the publicity of those offline. A return to the offline public sphere and the moral education of citizens that occurs within it can turn the Internet from a technological problem child into an immensely powerful democratic tool.

In Plato’s Republic, Glaucon feared the Ring of Gyges would cause even the most just human to act depravedly, but Socrates, responding much later in the text, was far more optimistic. Morally right action wasn’t just action that avoided punishment. Rather, it was that action which allowed the individual to overcome his appetites and act in accordance with justice despite them. He who neglected justice while anonymous and invisible remained enslaved to his desires, while one who could act rationally and thus morally, even when unaccountable, remained in control of himself, freer and happier.
Socrates saw moral education as the key to overcoming the urges to act unjustly under the conditions provided by the Ring of Gyges (Bk. X, 612b). Like Socrates and Plato, I argue that a reengagement with the values of public citizenship and the sacrifice of individual desires that comes with it can mitigate the detrimental effects on online communication while highlighting its powerful positive aspects. Under conditions of anonymity, individuals act like the beings that populate Hobbes’ state of nature, acting instrumentally rationally (and often irrationally) solely in accordance with their own self-interest. Without a set of public values in place, even identifiable citizens may act in the same way.

Crucial to both Plato’s account and my concluding argument is the integral role of sacrifice plays in good citizenship. The philosopher king sacrificed pursuing his appetites for the cause of moral action, just as the citizen must sacrifice their own private good for public good or their own convictions when they are not in the majority. Sacrifice lies at the heart of the social contract and deliberative traditions—individuals give up their agency (to varying degrees) when they enter into the social contract and when they choose to act within shared moral frameworks. When individuals come to recognize each other as free and reasonable human beings and as political equals, they sacrifice their ability and desire to dominate others in the public sphere. But even beyond the sacrifice of self-interest, democracy simply entails losing. So long as democratic processes do not end in consensus, majorities generally enact their preferred policies and those in the minority inevitably have to live under conditions they didn’t choose themselves or potentially hurt them directly. For instance, banning smoking indoors is widely supported by citizens, and should be, but such policies come at the expense of smokers’ having to enjoy their cigarettes out in the rain and cold. Though gun control
legislation may protect citizens from violence, it also means gun owners must give up their weapons and, to an extent, their ability to protect themselves. Allen writes, “The site of sacrifice is between the social world—of custom and of mental, physical, and economic harm from other citizens—and the political world of institutions and practices for the sake of which one wants to master that harm” (29). As citizens, we inevitably give up our personal freedom for shared standards, for the sake of democratic processes built on majority rule, and for the common good—“the preposition ‘for’ betrays the phrase as plea, exhortation, and finally justification” (41).

The relationships that have made up so much of my arguments—those involving mutual recognition, those between citizens and members of a public, those based in accountability to shared norms—embody this idea of civic sacrifice. In the context of the public, we give up our ability to push for certain policies and must restrict ourselves to certain forms of argumentation prefaced on political equality and universal accessibility. As members of a public, we are inevitably subject to the demands of others and the randomness of our encounters in public space. To be a member of the public is to submit oneself to the norms of conduct and legitimacy in part fostered by others unlike ourselves.¹ This is one of the great contradictions of democratic life: “by definition [we are] empowered only to be disempowered. As a result, democratic citizenship requires rituals to manage the psychological tension that arises from being a nearly powerless sovereign” (Allen 41).

¹ Such sacrifice, however, is only just so far as all citizens are called on to sacrifice under similar conditions as political equals—when they lose a vote, when a policy they disapprove of is enacted, when their values run contrary to the public’s. But “sacrifice becomes illegitimate when one party regularly sacrifices for the rest” (Allen 110). Reciprocity and equality are the cornerstones of legitimate and fair civic sacrifice. How might citizens come to recognize their sacrifice as just even if they feel slighted by such demands? Such an issue is only resolvable through the moral education that can come out of a reengagement with civil society.
Such a ritual, I believe, comes in the form of trust building between citizens and the institutions they give shape to. Trust allows for a sense of mutual sacrifice, that under certain conditions, all individuals will be called to sacrifice some of their agency regardless of whether they would like to or not. Laws against theft require that I give up my right to steal the property of other, but my trust that other citizens will also make that sacrifice allows me to see my own acquiescence as legitimate. And more pressingly for our purposes, when members of a public recognize their shared values as citizens and act in accordance with them, they trust others will follow suit. Trust, in this sense, is a crucial part of citizenship and the moral education that follows it. When individuals violate publically shared norms, they violate this trust, and mechanisms of social control and accountability induce individuals to come back into conformity with those norms.

When I evoke a shared membership in a moral community when calling another to account from a second-person standpoint, I make an appeal to trust: as members of a public, our legitimate demands are prefaced on reciprocity. I demand this of you as I expect you to demand the same of me. We submit ourselves to the demands of others when we form a moral community, and we accept the sacrifice of our agency when we acquiesce to those demands on grounds that we trust others to do the same. Civic trust ameliorates the paradox of empowerment and sacrifice individuals experience as a regular part of democratic life.

When we go online and talk with our fellow citizens, however, our sense of responsibility to others and the sacrifice that comes with that responsibility becomes diffused. As I have explained, the factors that help bring public consciousness about—accountable dialogue, shared experiences, confrontation, and mutual recognition—are considerably weakened, and, as a result, so too are the trust bonds that hold the public
together. The trust born of mutual recognition grows fainter as individuals move toward a more abstract and disindividuated sort of coexistence online. These new conditions of communication undermine our ability to recognize others as fully reasonable subjects, capable of making legitimate demands, and so we come to neglect the reciprocity of sacrifice (Allen, 107). The sacrifice and acquiescence to public norms that allow for a public seem increasingly unjust and the equality of such demands more remote, and the public sphere becomes dispersed and fractured.

And yet the ideals of citizenship suggest ways to regain the Internet as a democratic tool. We cannot rely on the Internet to foster the sort of civic engagement and trust that will help counteract its own deindividuating and polarizing tendencies. The Internet itself can’t support the formation of a public for these very reasons. But if matched with a reengagement with the offline public sphere and a resurgence of public trust, the openness and freedom provided by the Internet can become powerful complements to civil society. Political science research shows a strong correlation between how trusting a user is and how open and tolerant they are online. Users who viewed their online fellows as generally trustworthy were more likely to identify themselves to others by name, while remaining tolerant of other’s preference for anonymity (Uslaner 232-234). Citizens with a deep respect for public moral consciousness and strong bonds of trust with their fellows can ideally overcome the temptations and effects of an anonymous public sphere. First and foremost, such a solution requires treating the Internet as an extension of real space civil society still beholden to the values of the public and the meanings of the lifeworld, not as a separate realm in itself. Citizenship online is the same as citizenship off.
But how to foster the civic trust and engagement so necessary to good citizenship in the digital age? There is no easy or conclusive answer to this question, and it extends far beyond the issue of the Internet. Robert Putnam’s now famous essay, later adapted into a full-length book, *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital* lamented the deterioration of American civic life. Even prior to the Internet’s widespread adoption and integration into everyday life, the American propensity for civic association that Tocqueville had so lauded in the 1830s had given way to a public that was more isolated and apathetic and less trusting than ever (Putnam, “Bowling” 65). Further research suggests similar declines in social capital are occurring in other advanced industrial democracies in Europe and elsewhere (*Democracies*). This issue of regaining civic trust touches a nerve throughout many dimensions of democratic life.

I can barely begin to explore this question of how to reverse the civic decline of the past few decades. But at the very least, I think, it requires a return to the norms of public mindedness and reasoned dialogue in our real space interactions and efforts to shape Internet dialogue alongside similar public norms. Thus, a few brief suggestions. If civil society is to counteract the polarizing and factionalizing tendencies increasingly rampant on the Internet and in offline niche media, it will require a new emphasis on commonality, like finding new forums for debate among individuals with a diversity of perspectives, promoting media and information sources committed less to politically editorializing and more to uncovering and exhibiting social problems, and committing to certain norms of universality and rationality in forms of argumentation based on mutual recognition in online and offline forums. How to achieve these aims through simple policy decisions is no simple task, and I have no readymade answers, but I do think
Fishkin and Bruce Ackerman offer a bold, if somewhat quixotic, suggestion that isn't too far off the mark. Imagine:

“Deliberation Day—a new national holiday. It will be held two weeks before major national elections. Registered voters will be called together in neighborhood meeting places, in small groups of fifteen, and larger groups of five hundred, to discuss the central issues raised by the campaign. Each deliberator will be paid $150 for the day’s work of citizenship. To allow the rest of the workday world to proceed, the holiday will be a two-day affair, and every citizen will have the right to take one day off to deliberate on the choices facing the nation.” (3)

Whether Deliberation Day is feasible or not is not the point. It’s that we require events, encounters, and associations that bring people together to discuss important issues and that these processes are structured so that the dialogue is constructive and equitable. By ensuring that participants have shared information sources (all participants have access to the same information prior to Deliberation Day) would help to mitigate the polarizing and isolating tendencies of online and niche media, and allow for open discourse that can identify shared values and norms. By uncovering such a moral consciousness underlying disparate political positions through discussion, individuals can more readily develop trust based on shared norms. Even more simply, Allen suggests that we can generate social trust just by following such norms of rational argumentation in our political discussions—aiming to convince all of our audience rather than achieving a simple majority, engaging with those diametrically opposed to our views, approaching problems from the standpoint of universal principles, and, above all, listening to others (157). Sacrifice,
in this sense, comes from restricting oneself to certain principles of deliberation, and that very act of public deference can itself be trust inspiring. By engaging with each other and sacrificing some freedom by agreeing to follow norms of mutual recognition among political equals, we show to others that we can be trusted to not take advantage of their restraint. Through reciprocity, we may be able to salvage the social trust and concern for public morals necessary to a flourishing balance between anonymity and publicity in the public sphere.

Citizenship and membership in a public depends upon mutual recognition, equal deference to the legitimate demands and expectations of others, and trust in the reciprocity of sacrifice. The Internet, in some way or another, undermines all three, leading to a new sort of public sphere where the bonds of citizenship and the public good are weaker and distant. On face value, the Internet seems like a powerful expansion of the deliberative and democratic capacities available to citizens and a boon for the possibility of a public as it is in some ways. But, as we’ve seen, the Internet does not just expand the communicative opportunities available to us. It is fundamentally changing communication, reorienting the way we interact with and conceive of each other as individual citizens and as a citizenry as a whole. Inevitably, our technological creations radically alter civil society, our democracies, and our entire conception of the reality we share with others. The problem of the networked public is ultimately one of recognizing our dependence on our creations and on each other. Citizens form publics out of an interest in controlling the effects their individual actions have on one another, forming and acting within shared normative frameworks in the name of self-determination. The public is about taking control over our actions so that they do not result in consequences that are out of our hands.
Technology, in a sense, strives to do the same thing—control the seemingly uncontrollable. The Internet has allowed individuals to regulate their information consumption and interactions in startling and potent new ways. The unidirectional structures of mass media that defined the industrial information economy are giving way, as Benkler is right to suggest, to something more decentralized, buoyed by the control granted to the individual. But this control is coupled with even greater uncertainty—we are shaped by our creations just as we shape them. A shift toward a networked information economy brings with it unknowable social change and radical alterations in the way we act and interact. Thus, to view the Internet simply as a tool is to neglect the fact that we've created a world with the capacity for instant connectivity. We don’t just log in and log off—the Internet, to evoke Wittgenstein again, is a form of life, actively reconstituting the way we experience the world and the social interactions within it. I began this project with a simple paradox—the coexistence of pervasive anonymity and constant surveillance in the online world—and perhaps it’s fitting to close with one as well. Technologies offer us control of the objective phenomena that surround us, but so long as we, to paraphrase Winner, sleepwalk through their reconfiguring of our existence, they also destabilize the institutions and interactions of social life. Technology has within it a tension between order and chaos.

My goal has been to engage with the effects the changing conditions of communication provided by the Internet have on democratic life, but perhaps more broadly, I’ve sought to wake up from our technological somnambulism and grab hold of the ways technology shapes those parts of life we most often take for granted. The Internet has touched nearly every aspect of the lives of citizens in advanced
democracies—how they travel, consume, organize, communicate, understand, and experience the world around them. Over the course of this thesis, I have argued that the Internet, when left to its own devices or seen as a full-fledged alternative to the real space public sphere, has profound and often ugly effects on public life. But understanding these effects and balancing them with civic reengagement offline can make the networked public sphere a powerful tool in revitalizing deliberative democracy. Our role as citizens offers us the unique ability to make sure the Internet’s reconfiguring of the world around us happens on the public’s terms.
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