The publics behind political web campaigning: the digital transformation of 'classic'counter-public spheres

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The Publics Behind Political Web Campaigning. The Digital Transformation of 'Classic' Counter-Public Spheres

Campaigning constitutes the essential communicative connection between actors from the field of counterculture and their environment. By addressing the relevant audiences both internally and externally, campaigning establishes a successful issue-orientated network. Over the last few years, however, the operating conditions of political actors have radically changed. Socio-political and technological changes have played key roles within this process. From the viewpoint of communication, these changes not only have an impact on the constitution of counter-public spheres, but also influence campaign methods as the central instrument in gaining mass media resonance. Against this background, this analysis provides a theoretical framework for the basis of a deeper understanding and an empirical analysis of the structural change of counter-public spheres. Firstly, this chapter explores not only the impact of new Internet uses[1] on the formation of counter-public spheres in general, but the proposed theoretical framework also explains their (new) communicative relationship to the mass media public sphere, primarily through *net activism* and *web campaigning*. As the phenomenon of counter-public spheres is neither consistently nor sufficiently conceptually clarified, the second section delivers a short theoretical differentiation. The third section presents a comprehensive systematization of the various forms, functions and political potential of digital counter-public spheres and campaigning. The final section of this chapter discusses the potential positive and negative impacts of the digitalization of counter-public spheres and their communicative campaigning.

Counter-Public Spheres and (Web) Campaigning

For different reasons, collective actors from the realm of counter-publicity have to prove themselves more and more versed on the 'market of opinions', i.e. in the *arena* of political public sphere, than established political actors: As they do not have direct access to the political system, they have to try, like all

1 Kahn and Kellner (2004) provide an overview on new forms of media activism and new forms of emancipative appropriation of new media beside the Internet (smart mobs etc.).

non-established political actors, to gain political influence in the form of *resonance* in the media system. Ideally, they often pursue a double strategy. Firstly, they seek to inform and mobilize the audience around the positions of the counter-public spheres through use of mass and alternative media coverage. In a second step, interested recipients are to be integrated into the counter-public sphere by movement media.[2] In order to reach these communication goals, Rucht (2004: 36-38) distinguishes four ideal types of communication strategies:[3] *abstention*, *attack*, *adaptation* and *alternatives*. While *abstention* and *attack* strategies entail communication activities within a collective actor organization and are directed at the internal communication, the *adaptation* and *alternatives* strategies are externally directed, and thus involve addressing the mass media. In modern media society, it is crucial that these straightforward typologies of public communication and activities are increasingly organized as campaigns.[4] Campaigns are ostensibly mass media orientated. They refer to the complex relationship between counter-public spheres and the mass media: Collective actors and their actions from different counter-public spheres are not plausible without coverage from alternative media (Downing 2001) or without established mass media (e.g. Gamson/Wolfsfeld 1993; Gitlin 1980). The different types of media initiate and maintain the public communication processes. Conversely, campaigns have always been comprehended in the context of their carrier. Unlike campaigns of the advertising industry and of established political actors, critical publics understand themselves as part of the normative tradition of counter-publicity, who want to revitalize a critical civil society rather than to solely to gain public attention.[5]

Central to the current process of change, however, is the process of *digitalization*. Collective actors of counter-publicity increasingly make use of the new media, specifically the Internet, as a space for their communicative activities and campaigns, generally referred to as *web campaigning* (Foot/Schneider

2 Media and audience related communication goals must be distinguished from policy-related goals (Wimmer 2007: 226-227). Following the terminology of Goffman, however, a distinction can be made between the publicly visible *frontstage* and a less visible *backstage* of political public. These are the perspectives from which other relationships between the actors and other types of political communication, e.g. *lobbying*, must be investigated.

3 Strictly speaking, Rucht (2004) only refers to new social movements (NSM). These media strategies, however, can be seen as ideal types for all actors of counter-publicity.

4 For non-established political actors see Baringhorst et al. 2007; Bennett 2004: 131-134; generally Röttger 2006.

5 A survey of the normative approaches of counter-publicity offered in Wimmer 2007: 154-157.

2006). Currently, new media seem to offer completely new possibilities of information, communication and mobilization, which can have a significant influence on the realization of a campaign. The frequent presumption that new media is hastily appropriated by all non-established political actors leads increasingly to the theoretical postulate that society is approaching a renaissance of critical voices in the public spheres and an overall digital reconstitution of alternative communication (e.g. Atton 2002). Graber (2002: 93-94) similarly observes:

> [T]he literature on interest networks and global activism seems particularly rich in examples of how various uses of the Internet and the Web have transformed activism, political pressure, and public communication strategies. [...] Research on civic organizations and political mobilization is characterized by findings showing potentially large effects of new media and for the breadth of directly applicable theory.

Often, the genesis of the Internet itself is used here as evidence. Oy (2002: 69) declares that in the United States (US) the development of computer technology would have not been possible without alternative counter-public spheres. In other words, the expressive power of critical counter-public spheres, technological change and social change are mutually dependant. A technological deterministic model, however, is not plausible, as the expressive power of counter-public spheres cannot be reduced to the process of data exchange.

Thus, the various dimensions of this specific *communication* process (production, representation and appropriation) have to be simultaneously considered when analyzing the political consequences and implications of the digitalization of counter-publics and their campaigning. It is crucial to determine the degree to which new media is integrated in the activist's political practice and what social network structures and participatory actions they create (e.g. Diani 2003; van de Donk et al. 2004).[6] These issues are rapidly gaining importance due to the aforementioned new Internet applications and their potential for connectivity, interactivity and collaboration. The shift in the rights of use

6 Hamm and Zaiser (2000: 755, translation J.W.) were the first to call for research in this area: "The question is, whether the rapid appropriation of new media implicated a qualitative change in alternative forms of communication and networks. How is the use of technological possibilities connected to the makers' political, cultural and social practice and the resulting products of left media on the Internet? How have the specific possibilities of information technology-speed, international accessibility with no printing and distribution costs resulted in a change in form, content and distribution of left-wing publications? Or do network publications reproduce already well-known forms based on existing correlations?"

(principles of open source and open publishing) of these applications also effects the increasing import to activist practice.

The Phenomenon of Counter-Public Spheres from the Perspective of Communication and Media Studies

In a narrow sense, counter-public sphere implies the relatively diverse phenomena of public communication and civil society networks, all often subsumed under this overused term. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the counter-public has been applied to actions of new social movements (NSM) (such as student, peace or environment movements), as well as to the structures and aims of alternative media (e.g. alternative press, free radio stations, open channels). Currently, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media activists projects and, more recently, blogs, social networking sites and other participatory Internet-based media are leading the discussion of counter-public spheres.

From a communication and media studies perspective, Krotz's (1998: 653, translation J.W.) definition of counter-publics provides a good starting point: "Counter-public sphere means a specific public that is set against a hegemonic public sphere centred around a specific social discourse or point of view". Krotz indicates NSMs and the alternative press as the primary medium of counter-public spheres. The formation of counter-public spheres, however, can be found even much earlier. Early examples of existing counter-public practices can be observed in the leaflets of Protestant reformers in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Publications and media of the worker's movement at the end of the nineteenth century also provide a salient example. A specific social and historical context of counter-public spheres in the modern sense can, however, be identified through the NSMs and associated alternative media of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Atton 2002). Although these movements should not be seen as the first collective actors of social counter-public spheres, they are still the first non-established political actors whose actions were oriented according to mass media logic.[7] Further proof draw from the

7 Right-wing extremist or real-socialist 'counter-public spheres' can only be considered with regard to structural aspects of public spheres, since both alternative and movement media can be found here (e.g. Atton 2006; Bokor 2005). The varying forms of this kind of counter-public spheres, nevertheless, do not respond to the normative context of counter-public spheres in the sense of emancipative strategies that serve to strengthen democracy (for more detail see Wimmer 2007), neither from the content nor in the practice.

term counter-public sphere itself, which comes from the student movement and its language.[8]

After the institutionalization of NSMs and alternative media during the 1980s, and after a decrease in academic interest, the phenomenon of counter-public spheres has once again begun to attract attention. From an activist point of view, this increasing interest can be explained by three interconnected contemporary social processes.

Firstly, *political and economical change* manifests itself within the context of increasing globalization and increased criticism of globalization (e.g. Castells 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Wimmer 2003). Secondly, *social change*, which is to be understood as the process of the reflexive modernization, offers new possibilities for progressive (political) collective actors (e.g. Beck et al. 1994). The crisis of the (dominant) public sphere, therefore, enhances critical voices within the political public sphere, but also allows for non-established political actors such as NGOs and NSMs to take over central functions within political processes; these can be understood as the processes of subpolitics (Beck 1986). Thirdly, *rapid media technology change* manifests itself within new information and communication technology (ICT)[9] and its increased potential (e.g. Downey/Fenton 2003; Palczewski 2001; Plake et al. 2001). Dominant models of the public sphere, therefore, allocate the role of counter-publicity to civic society, in general, and, more specifically, to NSMs, new media and NGOs.[10] Most empirical research reduces phenomena of counter-public spheres to these institutions – understood as expanded aspects of social and communicative actions. From an analytical point of view, however, this does not suffice since the concept of counter-public spheres cannot be reduced to certain persons, places or topics. In fact, the emergence of counter-public spheres is more complex: "[...] [C]ounterpublics as discursive entities emerge in a multiple public sphere through constellation of persons, places and topics" (Asen 2000: 430). Indeed, the term 'counter-public sphere' like the term 'public sphere' has to be seen not as monolithic but as multidimensional; both terms refer to the micro, meso and macro levels of public communication (Gerhards/Neidhardt

8 Gilcher-Holtey (2002: 316) postulates that the concept of counter-publicity heavily shaped the political culture in Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s especially in Germany. The latter has to be put into perspective as the term *counter-culture* does play a role as a label for American movements. It refers, however, to counter-publicity in a broad sense.

9 Online communication, which predominately takes place with help of the Internet, only represents one element; it, however, can be seen as the most relevant element concerning society.

10 For more detail see Wimmer 2007.

1990; Habermas 1992: 452-53; Ferree et al. 2002) while also referring to the functional and subjective aspects of the phenomena at the same time (for more detail see Wimmer 2007).[11]

From a structural perspective the term refers to three forms of publics (see figure 1). Firstly, it defines critical publics that perceive their positions as marginal to society. By means of alternative media and political campaigns, they are targeting the coverage of the established mass media in order to enforce their political standing and perception, which specifically is the alternative public sphere. In this case, a distinction can be made between alternative media with a broader audience and with, therefore, a greater agenda setting power – e.g. the German newspaper as *alternative media opinion leaders* – and those with a narrower public reach such as local open channels, which function as *alternative follow-up media.* At the organisational meso-level, counter-public spheres refer to collective and, above all, political processes of learning and experience within alternative organizational structures, which are themselves located within the broad field of civil society. NSMs and their movement media provide the relevant examples of *participatory public spheres.* On the micro-level, *media activism* is observed. This refers to interactions and interpersonal communication of various forms, which are primarily individual media interventions located in the realm of new media and alternative communication practice. The boundaries between the various levels of public communication are very blurry and contingent on case-specific contexts. This holds true, in particular, for public spheres in the form of NSMs. Movement publicity primarily constitutes the mass media perception, representation and, thus, the public effect of the NSM. In turn, the perception of and response to an alternative public sphere by the established public sphere provides for the internal mobilisation and stabilisation of the NSM (see section 1). This process usually happens through the construction of a shared *frame* of interpretation, which enables the NSM not only to legitimate their actions but also to justify their protest against society (e.g. Snow/Benford 1988; McAdam 1994). NSMs are communicative systems, whose existence and continuity are ensured, primarily in the framework of protest campaigns, by the media-related fusion of movement actors, collective identity and mass media publicity (e.g. Roth 1991; Rucht 1994).[12]

11 For this reason, we chose rather to use the plural form of *counter-public spheres.*

12 Thompson (1995) calls these processes *identity policy*, which mostly deals with the visibility of the own position in the mass media, see fundamentally Castells 1996, 1997a.

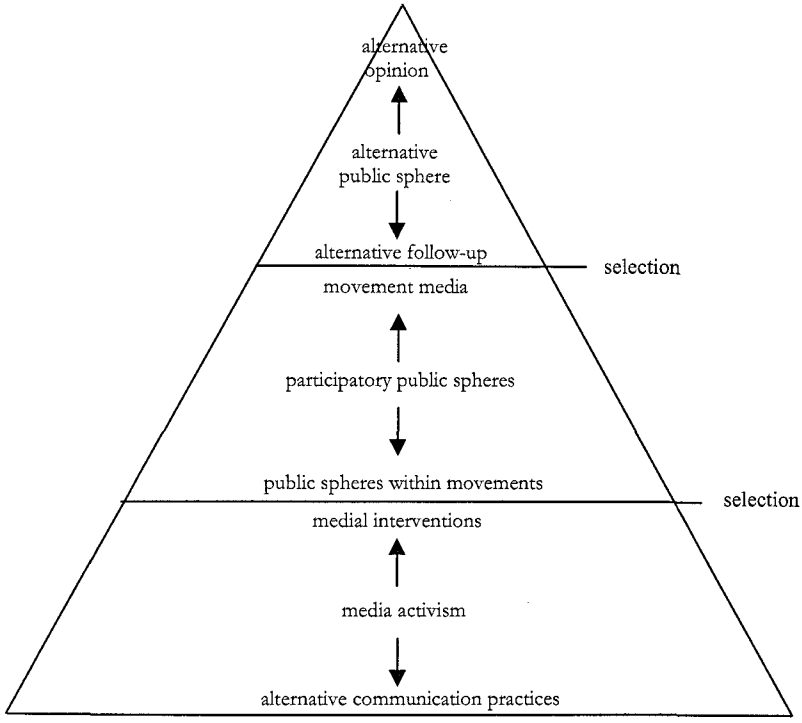

Figure 1: Objective and social dimensions of counter-public spheres.

The Political Potential of Digital Counter-Public Spheres

Since the turn of the millennium, it has been only natural for established, as well as non-established, political actors to be present online (e.g. Resnick 1998).[13] The Internet has helped to realize the idea of a decentralized communication network, maintained by civil society and understood as a medium that provides for self-organization. Critical counter-public spheres can no longer be conceptualized without these new technical possibilities (e.g. Andretta et al. 2003, Kahn/Kellner 2004). Moreover, counter-public spheres have their organisational basis predominately through their digital communication, which often takes place online. New online applications such as mailing lists, community networks, video conferences, virtual communities, wikis, podcasts, or

13 Representatives of civil society had long been pioneers in using new media for political concerns. However, even in this field one remarks the increasing institutionalization and commercialization (see in general Hill/Hughes 1998), e.g. the history of community networks (Dahlberg 2004; Lovink/Riemens 2004).

blogs are increasingly used for work and organization. These applications differ fundamentally from classic mass and organizational media. New features include the link up of communication content (*hypertextuality*) and the compatibility with a variety of other media applications (*multimediality*). In addition, content can be generated and reworked by certain counter-public spheres as well as by individual recipients (*interactivity*). Within web campaigning activities, these abstract characteristics correspond to specific applications:[14] Logos on websites can, for example, point out that the owner of the website sympathizes with certain political campaigns. Furthermore, 'disclosure' websites can be produced to point out a factual or fictional unethical action of a person or organization, expose relevant material and, possibly, call for protest. Thus, online media are not only used for dispersing information, but also for coordinating and communicating actions. Through a *snowball effect*, electronic chain letters, for example, can reach an audience as large or larger than an offline protest activity. Other examples include hackers who reprogram source code,[15] or virtual sit-ins and online strikes that aim to crash websites by straining them with an overflow of simultaneous visits. From an activist perspective these actions are also understood as a form of "electronic civil disobedience" (Wray 1999).[16]

New media do not only have a supporting function for concrete political campaigns, online activities are to be seen as indistinguishable from offline-activities (Berman/Mulligan 2003). Cronauer (2004) points out this synergy in her analysis of mailing lists that are set up in the framework of protest campaigns. Online activities can include: (1) the sending of articles to the mailing list (e.g. the forwarding of online information, the supply and forwarding of newspaper articles, the participation in discussions or the announcement of group activities), (2) the setup of online spaces (e.g. websites or other mailing lists) to support the goals and activities of a group, (3) the forwarding and spreading of information from this mailing list, e.g. to other mailing lists or other persons and (4) the initiation or participation in email campaigns and online petitions. Offline activities are comprised of, among others, (1) the participation in letter or telephone campaigns, (2) the participation in events or

14 See in more detail Bieber 1999; Berman/Mulligan 2003; Earl 2006.

15 A prominent example is the software flood net which was developed by an American group of artists called *Electronic Disturbance Theater* (EDT) (Wray 1999). This software allows the automation of virtual sit-ins. Participants connect to flood net which is activated during a pronounced time. The software leads the online user to a particular website and the reload command is executed automatically every couple of seconds which strains the targeted website (Schneider 2002).

16 For an example of electronic civil disobedience as campaign tactics see Kneip's discussion of the *Deportation Class Campaign* in this volume.

group meetings or (3) the acceptance of certain duties like planning the protest type and protest activities.

Digital applications not only represent means of decreasing distance but also of speeding up communication. Theoretically, they also inherit the potential of an almost unlimited expansion coupled with interactivity (*cyberspace*) while connecting internal and external target groups of political actors (*connectivity*). In general, Internet applications can offer several *functions* for the constitution of counter-public spheres (table 1):

Function	**Selected Authors**
Articulation	→ Ludwig 1998; McDorman 2001; Scholl 2005
Emancipation/Identification	→ Ludwig 1998; McDorman 2001
Information/Communication	→ Autonome A.F.R.I.K.A. Gruppe 2002; Hamm/Zaiser 2000; Keck/Sikkink 1998; Rucht 2004
Mobilization	→ Couldry/Curran 2003; Garcia/Lovink 1999; Keck/Sikkink 1998; McDorman 2001; Rucht 2004
Organization	→ Keck/Sikkink 1998; Smith 2001; Wall 2002; Warkentin 2001
Protest	→ Bieber 2001; van de Donk et al. 2004; Scott/Street 2002
Subversion	→ Autonome A.F.R.I.K.A. Gruppe 2002; Lovink 2004

Table 1: Functions of Internet applications relevant to counter-public spheres.

Castells (1997b: 362) recognizes that Internet applications have the potential for a far reaching mobilization: "It appears that it is in the realm of symbolic politics, and in the development of issue-oriented mobilization by groups and individuals outside the mainstream political system that the new electronic communication may have the most dramatic effects". The world became aware of this for the first time during the protests held at the *World Trade Organization* (WTO) conference in Seattle in December 1999. Due to their particular features Internet applications used for the protests can be understood predominately as instruments of *transnational* organization and communication; these tools were indispensable for preparing and carrying out such a protest (e.g. Downey/Fenton 2003; Wall 2002). To transfer political protest from the real world into cyberspace simultaneously changes a local event into a global one. Protest action, however, is predominately directed towards military, po-

litical and economic issues and, often, against the increasing commercialization of the Internet. Political activism on the Internet intends to make the audience uncertain in order to provoke thought (Lovink 2004). In the face of present power relations, this activism also aims to reallocate power resources. Publicly effective examples are projects such as *The Yes Men*, *Reclaim the Streets*, or *RTMark*.[17] Although these groups have been in most cases active since the 1980s, it was only since the wide-spread use of computer-based communication (CMC) that as a practice such movements have accelerated and proliferated.

The many forms of activism are too diverse to refer to *the* media activism of the Internet (e.g. see the listings in Harding 1997; Lubbers 2002; McKay 1998; Meikle 2002). Online media activism cannot be understood as a movement with a collective identity that could be described empirically. Instead it is more productive to conceptualize it as a *project,* which is dependent upon the perspective of the spectator, strives for *radical democracy* (e.g. Carroll/Hackett, 2006), for *net criticism* (e.g. Lovink 2004) or to become a *communication guerrilla* (e.g. Autonome A.F.R.I.K.A. Gruppe 2002). An example of an ideal activist type, with regard to the basic participatory aspect of Internet-based activism, is *One World TV* (*tv.oneworld.net*). Within the context of this independent Internet project, a public space was created to allow film journalists and producers, who have little access to mass media, to send their work and productions. The different video clips are linked thematically in order to create a loose interactive network. In this manner, participants of this project are able to not only communicate but also to exchange ideas via their productions.

Beyond these types of protest, which strive for subversion and collaboration, particular Internet applications facilitate the articulation of individual and collective counter-culture actors. Several online formats, which adapt and continue the functions of earlier alternative media, came into existence at the end of the 1990s. Alternative online media have seemingly overcome the loss of essential social meaning that defined alternative press during the 1980s (e.g. Atton 2002; Holtz-Bacha 1999: 345-346). While these peer-to-peer networks do not replace the functions of traditional journalism, they are able to amend journalistic functions, such as issue-orientation and service style information dissemination, in a critical and profitable fashion. Several media types can be distinguished, which, as a matter of course, inherit overlapping characteristics in relation to their functions:

17 These mostly subversive forms of protests are due to the resulting images and events more attractive for media reporting than any other form of media activism (e.g. *www.sueddeutsche.de/computer/bildstrecke/298/135039/p0*).

- *Alternative sources of information* are media that present and archive independent information permanently in a context of free use and collaboration (e.g. the free online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia*).
- *Alternative news services* are media that offer up-to-date, independent information in a collaborative context (e.g. the news and press agency *Wikinews* or *Infoshops*, which are examples inspired by the anarchist tradition, e.g. Atton 2003).
- *Alternative platforms for publication and discourse* include media that publish controversial information and, thus, create the foundation for leading alternative discourses (e.g. the independent online portal *indymedia*, e.g. Platon/Deuze 2003,[18] discussion listings such as *nettime*, e.g. Lovink 2004, or media watchdogs such as *BildBlog.de*).

In alternative media, however, the number of active participating users is relatively small relative to the traditional mass media and the wider population. As a result, it remains to be seen if the 'blogosphere' is a temporary phenomenon: It could disappear like any trend or it could become an established part of counter-public spheres (e.g. Welch 2003). New media has not, however, revived the critical and agenda setting function for their respective counter-public sphere, but some explorative case studies do show a degree of successful political offline/online campaigns (e.g. Almeida/Lichbach 2003; van den Bulck/Bedoyan 2004; Owens/Palmer 2003; Song 2007) and the emergence of emancipating online spaces, evident in discourses found in mailing lists (Siapera 2004; Wagner 1998; Zhang 2004). Other than direct attempts to influence public opinions, there are also indirect *structural* influences observable in the adoption of information from campaigning activities by established journalism.[19] From a journalist's point of view, online media becomes particularly attractive and authentic when dealing with the increasing competition and the pressure of keeping sources current. Online counter-public spheres and their issue-orientated campaigning also seem to offer additional information during

18 The first of the *Independent Media Centers* (IMCs), abbreviated *indymedia*, was founded in 1999 for the Anti-WTO Protests in Seattle (USA) in order to create an information platform for as many people as possible that could be used and installed by activists themselves. *indymedia* stands for an emancipatory use of media representing a form of net activism. The platform not only introduces online blockages but also contains information to interconnect activists (Mauruschat/Wimmer 2007). Applications used by *indymedia* are discussion fora, e-mail listings and open posting.

19 Weichler (1987) is among others the first to point out these processes from an empirical perspective and subsumes them within the label 'learning aptitude of bourgeois mass media' (see also Harcup 2005).

times of crisis when journalistic enquiries are prevented by censorship and other obstacles (e.g. war reporting or political crises).[20]

In the context of the Internet, the encroachment of established media alongside the existence of an alternative media practice must also be recognized. Thus, non hierarchical and interactive structures of counter-public online discussions (many-to-many) and the identity producing (virtual) communities of counter-public forums (community media) can already be found with slight variations and in many instances within the online content of mainstream mass media. The break up of mono-directional communication is used here, however, to strengthen the relationship between customer and product.

From a *theoretical perspective*, it can be concluded that new Internet applications influence counter-public spheres and their relation to the public sphere on all levels of public communication. On a micro-level, Internet applications are integrated into the political everyday life of media activists. On a meso-level, they are used both in internal and external communication as part of participatory public spheres (e.g. in the form of web campaigning). On a macro-level, these applications change the public sphere itself. From an 'enthusiastic' perspective of the power of new media, some assume that the dividing line between public and counter-public spheres is shifting (e.g. Plake et al. 2001: 145). From a *methodological perspective*, it is often neglected in the empirical analysis that a connection is emerging between different strands of public communication through web campaigning. Due, possibly, to pragmatic research constraints, recent analyses often focus on one of the levels (micro, meso, or macro-level) of public communication. Similarly, they often only focus upon either the offline or online dimension of campaigning. Comparative studies, particularly those investigating online and office synergy, are still rare (e.g. Baringhorst et al. 2007; Foot/Schneider 2006). In earlier studies, the focus lay with merely the content and form of web campaigns. Explanative research questions are seldom empirically considered. Examples include the analysis of the realization and the effects of web campaigning or the dynamic communicative relationship with the established public sphere of the mass media. Ideally, future studies should aim to delineate the goals of web campaigning of counter-public spheres. Each goal associated with counter-public spheres has a certain form of action, organization and intervention:

20 A good example is the press coverage of the G8-Summit in Genoa 2001 and the relatively high media resonance of Attac. This is due to the fact that journalists attached great importance to authentic, independent, and local based information and that Attac employed new forms of digitalized communication media (web page, SMS, email, etc.), see Fröhlich and Wimmer 2007.

- *Exertion of influence* on the content and the news selection of established mass media,
- *Critical observation* of established media coverage,
- *Organization* of independent, democratic and participatory ways of communication, in order to strengthen marginalized publics as well as to open up new ways of communication independent of state and economic influence, and
- *Exertion of influence* on the relationship between mass media and their audience – this is to be achieved by raising the audience's level of critical awareness of media, e.g. through pedagogical or subversive measures (Hackett 2000: 70-71).

Critical Conclusions

Many authors suggest that new media is leading towards a greater social relevance of counter-public spheres. It was often claimed in the late 1990s that the potential of new media, especially the usage of Internet for actors of the counter-public spheres should be analyzed empirically. This dimension seems to be, as briefly shown above, relatively well researched. Counter-public spheres can benefit from the participative structures of Internet uses in many ways: from the direct dialogue between sender and receiver, national and international interconnectedness, co-operation and co-ordination of campaigning activities, as well as the emergence of genuine alternative subcultures. The interconnectedness of movement participants and the emergence of a mutual, collective identity as central goals of counter-publicity have also been shown empirically (e.g. Andretta et al. 2003; Gillett 2003; Siapera 2004). In addition to direct attempts to influence public opinion through campaigning activities, counter-public spheres also indirectly influence opinion, one example includes the absorption of alternative communication practice into journalism.

With respect to wider society, however, counter-public spheres and their movements have until recently only been marginal communication processes that run parallel to mainstream public communication.[21] The increasing interconnectedness within web campaigning, however, does not automatically result in a stronger participation of the individual activists in the collective ac-

21 There are indeed numerous critical publics like NGOs, protest parties etc., but they are not per se constituting counter-public spheres in the sense of the previously outlined normative concepts of democracy, media and public sphere, see in general Wimmer 2007: 153-242.

tions (e.g. O'Donnell 2001), as the obstacles, barriers and limitations to use CMC are still present. Through his analysis of a British alternative information centre, Atton (2003) provides examples of the various legal, economical, and organizational *limitations* for participatory public spheres. Areas of autonomous communication can neither be easily established offline nor online. The autonomy of such critical public spheres is also constantly being threatened by, for example, competition with commercial organizations or by rigid legal specifications.

Apart from *analytical* descriptions of the processes of impact and appropriation involved in counter-public spheres, their normative *functions* must also be considered. From the point of view of critical theory, the ongoing embedding of the public sphere into structures of power is problematic. The audience is passive in the political communication and opinion making process, which is controlled mostly by elites. Online counter-public spheres enjoy a corrective role in relation to established politics and could potentially provide participatory innovations. This democratic potential can be also seen in empirical case studies – e.g. in the social solidarity initialized through counter-public spheres, in the participatory inclusion in the typically exclusive production system of mass media and also the proliferation of alternative media practice with specific emphasis on the *local* level (e.g. Asen/Brouwer 2001; Dahlberg/Siapera 2007).

As our understanding of new media and its potential grows, the danger of overloading and abuse does as well. Activists are no longer aware of the exact nature of the public sphere which they address through their *permanent campaigning* (e.g. Bennett 2004). Good examples of this negative potential are the protests against the *World Economics Forum* (WEF) 2003 in Davos. Activists from the *Oltner Bündnis* publicly criticized not only the established institutions but also their own inconsistencies on their homepage.[22] This was, from the activists' point of view, partially accepted as an exercised form of democracy.

From an analytical point of view, studies have yet to determine how the outlined forms of digital counter-public spheres and their campaigning *really* influence the dominant public sphere and the behaviour of the established political actors like governments and parties (= *macro dimension*) (e.g. Siapera 2004). Such investigation must extend beyond terms of measuring mass media resonance triggered by successful campaigning and inter-media agenda setting. In this sense, Downey and Fenton (2003: 199-200) justifiably observe: "The relationship of new media, counter-public spheres and the public sphere may become central to questions of democracy and legitimacy in coming years".

22 The former homepage (*www.oltnerbuendnis.ch*) could afterwards be bought as a free domain.

Also it is plausible to assume that dominant mass media and established political actors benefit from the properties of new media (e.g. possibilities of research, reaction publication and presentation). This leads, however, to their increased influence on public agenda and a growing resistance against influence of counter-public spheres (e.g. Downing 2001). The new media have *amplifying effects* like the growing publicity of non-established political actors such as NSM and their campaigning. There have, however, also been *unintended negative effects* such as the *digital divide*, which strengthens existing asymmetries within the public sphere, or the encroaching commercialization of the Internet (e.g. Bennett 2003).[23]

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