TALKING POLITICS ON THE NET
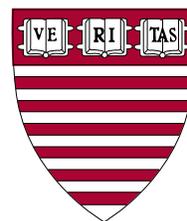
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Introduction

Is it still possible to use the concept of "public sphere?" If so, what meaning should be given to it? It has been more than thirty years since Habermas formulated such a concept (1962; 1989). The continuing interest in such an idea is due, on the one hand, to its role as an indicator of the democratic character of a society. Its presence testifies to the existence of opportunities for exchange and discussion between people on questions of public relevance. On the other hand, there is interest in its role as "an *analytic category*, a conceptual device which, while pointing to a specific social phenomenon can also aid us in analyzing and researching the phenomenon" (Curran's emphasis, 1991, p. 2).

Because of the double characterization of the public sphere as an indicator of democracy or an analytical category, the concept has frequently been used to study communication phenomena, from the creation of a "television market place" (Phelan, 1991) to the spread of new technologies. Over the last few years a great deal has been said about the electronic square as a possible modern version of the concept of "public sphere," because of its capability of playing an active role in revitalizing the relations between citizens and leaders. In addition, the electronic square can make access and circulation of information simpler, and facilitate debate on topics of general interest such as those of a political nature. Even though there is widespread awareness of the perils connected to the possibility that the gap between the information "haves" and "have nots" will grow, the virtual square created by the Internet commands much scholarly attention. This is focused on the evolution of the concept elaborated by Habermas and the innovations brought in by the communication flow (Boncheck, 1997). As Graber points out (1992), "even relatively minor variations in communication structures can produce substantial differences in information flow patterns and in the distribution of political influence" (p. 168). Furthermore, it is essential to keep in mind that

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the present opportunities provided by the Internet are bound to change as the social, economic and cultural context of the new technologies change. The minority that use the Internet these days can become the majority tomorrow. The use of the Internet will effect the production and consumption of political information.

The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of public sphere within computer mediated communication. The particular focus is on communication produced by citizens who take part in news groups of a political nature. These news groups consist of people who discuss, via computer, relevant events of political life. Particularly active during electoral campaigns, news groups have over time acquired a stability and an identity independent from that of the party and/or candidates sites from which they originated. The persistence of interest in discussing politics with other citizens even in the absence of exceptional events (like campaigns) constitutes a primary characteristic for such groups, which might be their most significant innovation. It is possible to consider the virtual space created by such groups as a modern translation of the Athenian *agora*, where people interacted as equals and discussed the *res publica*. In support of this interpretation, we find that like the *agora* the elements which best characterize the news groups are:

a) equality among members,
b) reference to personal experience,
c) reworking of the information provided by the traditional media.

The coming together of these three elements makes it possible that the news group can be ideally placed in a space which gradually shades from daily life into the world created by the media, with the constant aim of interpreting and debating questions of public relevance.

Placed upon a hypothetical *continuum* which goes from face-to-face interpersonal communication to communication through the traditional mass media, the news group can be put in an in-between position which connects the interactivity of the first with the breadth and immediacy of the second. There is interactivity, in fact, between the people who take part in a news group but, at the same time, it disappears for those people who limit themselves to playing

the role of spectators and who represent the traditional public of the media. News groups's interactivity is *sui generis* of a different nature from that found in face-to-face communication: in such a case, in fact, the subject who interacts shows direct as well as indirect signs of identification. In the case of the news group, the anonymity or even the operation of "spoofing" hides the subject from the eyes of the interlocutor. As in the case of mediated communication, however, the communicative act is a public act in which anyone can participate, either in the first person or through devices for identification (for instance, with a live audience in a television studio) (Scannell, 1991).

There is a need to look at examples of political discussion in news groups in order to discover how this media technology works. Empirical data from a survey conducted among four political news groups active in Italy will be presented in the pages that follow. In my opinion, these data suggest that the news groups can be regarded as an opportunity to bring the citizens back into talk politics. Facing a constant contraction of both the associative and participating phenomena within the modern democracies, computer mediated communication can help to recreate communities, albeit virtual, which share the same interest for the *res publica*.

Public Sphere and New Technologies

Beginning from the initial definition of the public sphere "as the sphere of private people come together as a public . . . to engage them in a debate over the general rules" (1989, p. 27) as formulated by Habermas himself, there has been an attempt from many sources to identify that sphere existing between civil society and the state where public discussion on topics of general interest occur in western society. In figurative terms, the public sphere can be represented as the Greek *agora* in which private citizens met and where discussions of public interest came together. As time went by, the agora has taken on many forms, becoming a coffee house, or a saloon for example, where meetings and discussions among subjects took place.

By analyzing the evolution of the concept of public sphere, Habermas identifies in the development of the press in Britain the birth of a forum for rational debate which is indifferent to ideological pressures and driven by the profit motive from commercial business (*ibidem*, p. 184). The public sphere thus is defined in relation to the mass media, which allow the flow of opinions and provide the conditions for such a

forum. According to Habermas, the progressive intertwining of state and society which asserted itself at the end of the last century has made possible the end of the public liberal sphere and the transformation of the media: "in comparison with the press of the liberal era, the mass media have on the one hand attained an incomparably greater range and effectiveness—the sphere of the public realm itself has expanded correspondingly. On the other hand they have been moved ever further out of this sphere and reentered the once private sphere of commodity exchange. The more their effectiveness in terms of publicity increased, the more they became accessible to the pressure of certain private interests, whether individual or collective" (*ibidem*, p. 188). Rather than representing a forum for rational discourse, the public sphere has become an orbit in which conflicting interests compete, completely excluding the citizens. In short, the public sphere tends to lose its characteristic as an "open" space for the members becoming, instead, a place in which diverse organizations represent special interests and attempt to reach agreement among themselves and the government's representatives. In such a setting, citizens are not given the opportunity to participate in a rational debate on questions of public interest.

Habermas has been much criticized with regard to the crisis/transformation of the public sphere and for his own definition of bourgeois public sphere. Frases (1993), for example, points out that the equality among subjects that could have occurred as stated by Habermas was impossible to achieve. "We can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal" said Fraser, "it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule" (p. 8). Scholars of the media system have criticized the inadequacy of an approach that completely ignores the active role of the audience (Fiske, 1987; Golding, 1990, 1997; Curran, 1990) and the changes brought about by an often larger and more diversified public (Dahlgren, 1991).

The technological progress of the media in the form of computer mediated communication offers a further opportunity to activate opportunities for discussion among citizens. Several scholars have welcomed the coming of computer mediated communication as a new and interesting opportunity for the democratic progress of a society (Ess, 1996), by emphasizing how it would restore to all subjects the ability to put their "ideas, concerns and demands before all others"

(Dertouzos, 1991). This new technology could also be "a way of revitalizing the open and widespread discussions among citizens that feed the roots of democratic society" (Rheingold, 1993). To some extent, the virtual square created by computer mediated communication can be considered as the Athenian *agora* which Habermas also spoke about when "in the discussion among citizens issues were made topical and took on shape" and "citizens indeed interacted as equals with equals" (1989, p. 4). In the news groups, on the bulletin boards and in the other computer networks created by the Internet, citizens interact as equals among equals and produce discussions on topics of public relevance from their own personal experience (Knapp, 1997) as well as from frames offered by traditional media. As Poster (1997) claims, while "the age of public sphere as face-to-face talk is clearly over: the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse" (p. 209).

The elements of major interest which characterize computer mediated communication are the equality among members involved in the discussion; the use of personal experience in the interpretation of the topics in discussion and the use of information offered by the media system in order to frame the issues. From many standpoints, the communicative context of news groups is much like that of a talk show, particularly a political talk show. In both cases, the substantial equality among members[1] and the personal experiences activate the communicative dynamics. Besides, the speaking by the subjects is a public activity (Scannell, 1991) directed not only to the interlocutor of the moment but also to the public who follows the show or takes part in the news groups. The positive performance of political talk shows and news groups during recent years testifies to the success of communicative modalities which are based on the direct and active involvement of the citizen in discourse with both public and private interactive dimension.

With regard to the element of equality which characterizes the news groups, one clear indication is the lack of prearranged positions or roles in conducting the discussion. With the exception of the news groups where there is a host who anticipates and controls the discussion, in all the others there is no expert who provides information unknown to the other members. As in the talk show, we observe the affirmation of knowledge which derives from commonsense practices and excludes any reference to data and to information not shared by all the subjects: "it is in the nature of the show to discourage the use of data or theories that are not immediately explicable and plausible [. . .] The talk show rejects the arrogance of a discourse that defines itself on the basis of its difference from common sense" (Carpignano et al., 1993, p. 117).

The acceptance of common sense as the basis of discourse gives implicit importance to the personal experience of the subjects involved. It is this second element which uniquely characterizes the conversation within news groups as in the talk show. The subjects who begin talking use their daily experience as a constant universe of reference, either in relation to the identification of the topics for discussion, or in relation to the use of information. Daily experience is the basis of the discussion when the topic is access difficulties to the labor force and you are unemployed, for instance. But, also, when it makes it possible to identify relevant issues not directly related to the conditions of subjects. So, for instance, many people have seen homeless people, and, while they are not homeless themselves, the experience of seeing the homeless helps to make them aware of the problem. In short, daily experience can be characterized in terms of reading clues or in terms of selection devices. In both cases, however, daily experience is a privileged element of mediation in relation to the political dimension.

The relation of computer mediated communication with the media system, lastly, assumes a relevant role in the construction of the frames adopted by people in order to activate discussion or just to take part in it. The media system sets the public agenda by presenting topics about which to debate, according to the classical schema formulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and, at the same time, provides the needed material to develop the discussion among subjects. The media system appears, then, both as a "source" and as an "instrument" which makes possible the communicative interaction.

The characterization of computer mediated communication along the terms outlined above makes it possible that it can be considered either as a new communicative product or as a new opportunity to strengthen political discussion among citizens. To see how this concretely happens will be the object of discussion in the ensuing pages.

News Groups on the Net

To explore some of these issues we can turn to an analysis of use of news groups in Italian

politics. Even as we witness a growing use of the Internet in Italy, which has gone from 584,000 *units* as of September 1996 to 1,377,000 as of September 1997, the size of the market continues to be of limited size.[1] Furthermore, the profile of the users has not changed in social, economic and cultural terms: the majority are male, relatively young, with an advanced level of education.

Table 1. Profile Internet Users in Italy	
Gender	
Male	90.6
Female	9.4
Age	
<18	6.1
18–25	16.9
26–35	45.8
36–50	30.7
51–65	4.4
>65	0.7
Education	
Grammar School	6.1
High School	53.4
College or Ph.D.	40.5
Community Size	
<5,000 inhabitants	9.6
5,000–50,000	27.8
50,000–150,000	18.4
150,000–500,000	19.0
>500,000	25.2

Source: Osservatoria Alcera, September 1997

Similar characteristics are found among Internet users in the United States (Pew Research Center, 1996) as well in other European countries (GVU, 1997), thus confirming the uniformity of the group and its differentiation in social terms from the rest of population. This consistent characterization of Internet users provides evidence that the fears of many sources regarding the gap between information haves and have nots are justified (Graber, 1996; Corrado, 1996). Internet use could lead to glaring inequities in economic opportunities. However, its rapid spread along with attempts to politically "control" access—by offering courses in the schools, for instance—give hope that, in the future, such a gap will be filled or, at least, reduced. As social, economic and cultural conditions change, the manner of using new technologies will change too, as has happened in the past with television and, before that, with radio.

Presently, some Internet users "use" the new technological medium not only to gather information—from reading daily and weekly publications to accessing data and information about public and governmental agencies—but also to create discussion groups on a variety of topics: from music to politics, from chess to astronomy. All the topics have right of citizenship in virtual space as long as there is someone interested. Such discussion groups, news groups, are based on the forwarding of messages, either original or as a response, by the participants and are articulated in a thread (combined messages related to a single issue). Everyone can take part by sending a message of response or suggesting a new issue for a discussion on a condition of "virtual freedom." The existence as well as the survival of a news group are exclusively conditioned by the purpose of the participants who can propose an alternative issue or leave the news group in case they find the discussion of little interest. The metaphor of the cocktail party advanced by Jones (1995) greatly clarifies the situation: "its electronic version is in full swing on computer networks, and there are many rooms, many people. In some rooms, there is the *maskenbal*, where identities are unknown and change often. In other rooms, there are serious discussions, games, pickup lines galore, and long-term relationships. The doors of these rooms are most often unlocked" (pp. vii–viii).

In general terms, the success of the news groups has been traced to the following reasons (James et al., 1995):
• a large audience
• fast sending and retrieving of message
• easy posting of messages
• many topics, interests
• low cost

Theoretically, the audience can be identified as the entire Internet population and those who have subscribed to the commercial services (as with America Online or Italia on Line) which shelter the news groups. Then the audience can be expanded by proposing new topics for discussion—capable of attracting new participants—or through the establishment of other groups. The ease, the speed and the inexpensive forwarding of the messages make participation especially attractive and help to expand the number of people involved. Also, "the network provides virtually total freedom of speech, and although there are practical limits on what a single person may read or write, there are, in principle, none of the rules of exclusiveness that govern parliamentary

assemblies where talk is limited by the convention that only one person may speak at a time. Everyone has the floor, twenty-four hours a day" (Benson, 1996, p. 363).

Besides these elements of access and organization of the news groups, the particular double role played by the participants must be underlined: they are, in fact, producers and at the same time receivers. They are producers when they send a message in reply to another or when they activate a new thread; they are receivers when they read a message sent by others.[2] In such duality of roles is revealed one of the vital elements of the news groups: the degree of audience activity (Morris, Ogan, 1996). The news group, in short, exists only to the extent that the participants—in the double role of producers and receivers—want it to exist.

Political News Groups on the Net

In September 1997, among the 221 news groups active on Italia On Line (one of the largest organizations operating in Italy), there were 9 groups devoted to debates on political issues.[3] It is a small number in relation to the total number of existing groups but it testifies to the interest in the country's political life. The object of the analysis of this paper concerns the news groups it.politica.pds (democratic party of the left), it.politica.ulivo (the government coalition), it.politica.polo (the political coalition headed by Forza Italia), and it.politica.destra (the political group identified with Alleanza Nazionale). Of the four groups examined, only the group it.politica.destra is organized around a moderator who screens the messages, proposes issues and "rules" the discussion.

In order to analyze the discussions that occurred within the news groups, I collected the texts of the messages sent in the month of September 1997. In all, 783 messages have been analyzed: 250 of it.politica.pds, 118 of it.politica.ulivo, 67 of it.politica.destra, 348 of it.politica.polo.The small number of messages sent to it.politica.destra is probably the result of the rules established by the host, who precludes the practice of crossposting, that is the sending of a message to many groups. Although considered a violation of Netiquette, the practice of crossposting is widespread among Italian news groups. In my opinion, crossposting testifies to the presence of an interest in specific issues that goes beyond the boundaries of a single group. Topics of general interest, such as those of a political nature, can often attract participation outside the confines of a specific group and, rather, they attract

interest precisely in the contrast with other subjects with a different "vision of the world." A good example of this is the significantly high number of messages sent simultaneously to it.politica.polo and it.politica.pds: 87 cases, about half of the total of crossposted messages. Crossposting between the two groups almost assumes the ways of the contrast majority/opposition, with interventions coming from different sides and finding sustenance from it. Except for it.politica.destra, all the groups analyzed practice crossposting and we shall see later how the most passionate discussions have been the result of interaction among different groups.

Table 2.	Crossport Messages			
	PDS	ULIVO	DESTRA	POLO
More than one group	56.0	60.1	4.5	48.3
Just one group	46.0	39.9	95.5	51.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	(250)	(118)	(67)	(348)

If the existence of messages sent to many groups can be regarded as an "indirect" indicator of the liveliness of discussion, a direct indicator is represented by the kind of messages present: whether they are original or replay messages to other participants. A high number of original messages marks the difficulties of finding topics of common interest capable of starting a discussion. Such a situation is the equivalent of the one that occurs when a question or a proposal for a topic evokes no response within a group of subjects. On the contrary, a high number of answers indicates a strong interest for the topic of discussion.

The majority of messages sent consists of answers, at the rate of 68.6 percent. The analysis of data shows that there are significant differences between the news groups: on the one hand, there is the group of it.politica.destra with a rate of 34.3 percent of replies; on the other hand, there are the groups of it.politica.pds and it.politica. polo with reply rates of 73.2 percent and 66.7 percent respectively. In the middle, there is the group of it.politica.ulivo with a reply rate of 54.3 percent. The consistent value as recorded by the group of it.politica.destra could indicate the existence of a true difficulty in finding common issues for discussion. Such a difficulty, however, could also be related to the presence of the host who, while on the one hand prevents the "flaming" and the "crosspost" operations—in short, he upholds Netiquette—on the other hand, weakens the discussion to the point of making it irrelevant. Based on available data,

it is not possible to support either of the two readings. However, the presence of the host can be considered counterproductive, if not harmful, in a communicative context where all subjects contribute in the same measure to the creation of the communicative product by undertaking the role of producer and receiver.

The number of messages sent by the subjects allows us to identify a further distinctive behavior of the news groups: a large number of messages sent by a few subjects points to a sort of "monopoly" of discussion, capable of forbidding the entry of new participants. A small number of messages sent by many people points to a good level of interaction and an "opening" opportunity to all interested subjects. Contrary to the common stereotype by which the news groups are based upon a few subjects who send many messages, data show that the majority of subjects send a single message. A similar result emerged in research conducted by Roberts and Owen (1997) on the contents of the conversation among the members of the electronic bulletin board discussion of America Online during the debates between the candidates for President of the United States. In the present study, the percentage of subjects who send numerous messages (5 or more) does not go over 14 percent in all four groups and it would not at all seem to jeopardize the "opening" of the group to anyone interested.

Table 3. Total of messages posted by person

	PDS	ULIVO	DESTRA	POLO
One message	58.7	64.8	60.6	65.2
Two messages	15.6	15.4	12.2	13.4
Three messages	6.2	9.9	15.1	4.3
Four messages	6.2	3.3	3.0	3.2
Over four messages	13.3	6.6	9.1	13.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Finally, data related to the organization and direction of the discussion helps to characterize the message, that is to reveal its contribution to the flow of conversation. For what reasons do people send messages to the news groups? In order to answer this question, 13 categories have been created which range from the offering of information to opinion asserting, a request for information and opinion refusing.

The reasons that most frequently induce people to participate in discussion are opinion asserting (28.2 percent) and opinion refusing (26.5 percent). Less frequently are the reasons of flaming[4] other speakers (9.6 percent), offering information (7 percent), and finding support for

Table 4. Content Analysis Categories

1. **Information/Explantation Seeking**
   Requesting information, data or explantation. For instance: "Could you tell me what is Padania?"
2. **Information Posting**
   Giving general information to other. No expertise is needed. For instance: "Padania is a region of Northern Italy."
3. **Opinion Asserting**
   Personal position on issue. It is possible to find evaluation and speculation. For instance: "Padania doesn't exist. It is just a fruit the political plain drawn by Bossi."
4. **Statements Refuting**
   Clear attempt to refute. Not necessary to quote statement refuted. For instance: "Padania exists. It is our country and you can't deny it."
5. **Opinion Seeking**
   Asking for positions on issue. What do people think about something? How do they feel about something? For instance: "Don't you think Buttiglione (the leader of one small party of the center) could be the leader of Forza Italia?"
6. **Support Seeking**
   Asking for participation in initiatives like sending messages to someone, or joining a new site. For instance: "Next Sunday the net goes into the square. Join us. Send a message."
7. **Personal Fact**
   Telling a personal experience. Communication of statement about self. For instance: "I'm going to tell you how schools work in our country. I must enroll my daughter in school but . . ."
8. **Channel Providing**
   Providing data or messages about use of computer, new sites, results of election for new sites. For instance: "The new group . . . has not been approved."
9. **Flaming**
   Personal and direct attacks. No other goal except to personally insult other people. For instance: "Why are you still speaking you bastard?"
10. **News Redistribution**
    Giving news from other sources. These sources can be newspapers, television news, and television programs, but also sentences from books. For instance: "More than 20 years ago, Pasolini wrote on *Corriere della Sera* 'I know who is responsible for the death . . .'"
11. **Humor**
    Posting anecdotes and quips.
12. **Metacommunication**
    Posting opinion about communication style. To appeal the Netiqette. For instance: "It is time to stop this kind of message."
13. **Uncodable**
    When messages don't fall in any category. Usually, this happens when messages publicize something. For instance: "are you interested in new insurance?"

Table 5. Goal of the Message					
	PDS	ULIVO	DESTRA	POLO	TOTAL
Information/Explanation Seeking	2.4	6.8	1.5	3.5	3.4
Information Posting	5.2	7.6	16.5	6.3	7.0
Opinion Asserting	23.6	17.8	31.8	34.3	28.2
Statements Refuting	34.0	21.2	17.9	24.4	26.5
Opinion Seeking	0.8	0.8	2.9	1.4	1.5
Support Seeking	7.2	8.4	14.9	4.6	6.8
Personal Fact	0.4	1.7	5.9	2.5	2.0
Channel Providing	6.4	10.2	4.6	2.1	4.8
Flaming	10.0	12.7	-	10.0	9.6
News Redistribution	2.0	4.3	-	1.7	2.0
Humor	4.0	2.5	1.5	4.3	3.7
Metacommunication	1.6	1.7	1.5	2.1	1.8
Uncodable	2.4	4.3	-	2.8	2.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	(250)	(118)	(67)	(348)	(785)

initiatives (6.8 percent). These data differ significantly from those collected by Hacker, Howl, Scott, Steiner (1996) in their analysis of online discussions conducted by citizens during the presidential campaign in 1992. They found that the messages were sent to assert opinions (42.9 percent), to refer to personal experiences (15.4 percent) and to offer information (9.3 percent). In short, the overall climate of the American discussion seemed to be quite relaxed, dominated by the effort to make opinions and personal experience known and to share one's own information. In the case of the discussions activated in the Italian news groups, the climate seems to be more quarrelsome, which at times leads to personal insult. With the lack of other comparative data it is impossible to ascribe this diversity to the general conditions of politics in the USA and in Italy, or to the particular moment of the electoral campaign, or, lastly, to a different "style" of interaction.

The analysis of data in relation to the message's goal for the individual news groups brings out significant differences. Messages sent to the group of it.politica.pds have the main goal of rejecting opinions and secondly of asserting opinions. Conversely, messages sent to the group of it.politica.polo propose first of all to assert opinions and, in a rather constrained way, to reject opinions. With regard to the other categories, the two groups show no significant differences confirming the presence of a strong similarity in organizing the discussion. The messages sent to the group of it.politica.ulivo which reject opinions are similar to those of the group of it.politica.pds, with the exception of the large number of messages intended to insult the interlocutor. Lastly, messages sent to the group it.politica.destra are above all intended to assert opinions, refute opinions, distribute information and seek support for initiatives.

Even in the light of informed diversity, the prevailing tone of discussion seems to be based upon the respect for the speaker—who is only rarely insulted or even attacked—and upon the desire to participate in the discussion, asking and offering information or soliciting opinions. The subjects who participate in the news groups seem to be motivated by the same need of "communicating with others in society" (Garramone, Harris, Anderson, 1986) which has been recorded among American participants of the political bulletin boards.

From the data so far examined, Italian news groups seem to be characterized in terms of a strong "liveliness" of discussion as shown by:
• widespread practice of crossposting among groups
• high number of answers within a thread
• degree of the "opening" of discussion
• open refuting of opinions and positions of other people

In short, the opportunity to talk politics is fully exploited by the subjects who are part of the news groups, at least at the organizational level.

Talking Politics on the Net

What are the subjects talking about when discussing politics? How do they select and identify issues to talk about? Who sets the agenda of the subjects? In research on a group of citizens involved in discussing political issues, Gamson (1992) has identified in the media discourse, in the experiential knowledge and in popular wisdom the most widespread conversational resources. In the selection of issues for discussion

within the news groups, people seem to direct their attention primarily to what the media have covered. Personal experience and popular wisdom do not contribute in a significant way to the selection of the issues, even though they can contribute to the articulation of the discussion.

The prominent role played by the media in setting the agenda of the participants of the news groups emerges from the analysis of the threads which include the highest number of messages. The discussions range from the news offered by the media system to the role of the Leftist Party to the future of a new party (Forza Italia) which already seems old. The breadth of the topics discussed bears witness to a lively interest as well as a clear willingness to talk about issues relevant to the country with all people, not just with those belonging to the same political group.

Discussion

The original question raised in this paper was related to the possibility of using the concept of public sphere in analyzing the communicative opportunity represented by the discussion groups in the Internet. The data presented in the preceding pages make it possible to answer in an affirmative way if the concept of public sphere is seen as an opportunity for citizens to debate issues of public interest in a condition of substantial equality. In the virtual square, in fact, all interested subjects have the right to intervene in order to express opinions and points of view related to their own personal experience in the world around them. It is a complex experience which derives from subjects' personal experience and from what they learn out of their relationship with the media, which offer topics for discussion and key reading. Analysis of the threads with the highest number of messages testifies to the influence of the media in selecting the issues but, also, to the role played by personal experience. The agenda of news groups is structured either in relation to the media agenda or to issues selected independently by the subjects.

Among the elements which characterize the news groups, the most remarkable is the claim by all subjects to talk just because they share an interest in discussing specific issues. In fact, within the community represented in the news groups there are not positions of preeminence indicated by special knowledge unknown to other subjects. When there is a hierarchical position, as in the case organized by a host, the overall level of the discussion is affected: both

the quantity and the quality are decreased. In the discussion groups based upon the equality of participation by the members, only the interest to communicate "something" is what legitimizes the intervention. In order to be able to intervene in the Previti Case, for instance, it is not necessary to have specific knowledge: it is enough to know current events and to have something to tell. Some scholars maintain that within the news groups "the division between the public-political and the private-personal seems to breaking down" and that "in groups whose topics range from Victorian Literature to Star Trek to welfare reform, participants engage in something like public debate. Yet unlike other public forums dominated by the conventional formal rhetoric of political debate, the specific views presented in the messages gain their authority from personal experience" (Knopp, 1996, p. 183).

Besides allowing anyone the right to intervene on the basis of sharing an interest for the topic alone, thus placing citizens in a position to interact as equals with equals, the news groups make possible the organization of a public debate. The debates that take place within the news groups, in fact, although hypothetically run among a few subjects, assume a public character because they are open to all persons who own a computer and are subscribers to the commercial service which shelters the group. The message sent to a news group can be regarded as the equivalent of a message which has as an audience all the people who are able, at any time, to tune in to the broadcasting entity which is disseminating the message. The size of the audience is potentially as large as that of the broadcaster which is spreading the message, and no one can know the exact size. Audience size is unknown not only to whoever sends the message but also to the subjects who get it and read it. In fact, the audience of a news group is not defined by the subjects who take part in the discussion. It includes also those persons who only read the messages without ever intervening.

The public dimension found in the news group precludes the coming to a confrontation with face-to-face communication. Furthermore, the condition of anonymity, the lack of a sense of place in spatial and social terms, makes this communicative product significantly different from the one created during a personal interaction. This is not only related to the practice of flaming, which would cause much difficulty in personal relations, but also to the opportunity to express personal opinions. Behind the screen of

anonymity it may well be easier to express opinions which one feels are part of the minority, without risking social sanctions (Noelle Neuman, 1974).

The equality among members, the right to intervene prompted only by interest in the issue, the public character of the discussion, the size of the audience, and the increased freedom of expression are all elements which help to make the discussion groups created in cyberspace a modern version of the concept of public sphere elaborated by Habermas. As Golding (1997) points out, the fact that there are citizens interested in talking politics can be viewed as a sign of "something we may loosely define as the public sphere."

Furthermore, the news groups can also be seen as the technological version of the civic community, which Putnam (1993) talks about in his research on institutional performance in Italy. In both cases, equality among members is at the foundation of the phenomenon and there are "equal rights and obligations for all. Such a community is bound together by horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation, not by vertical relations of authority and dependency. Citizens interact as equals" (p. 88). In Putnam's reading, civic communities play a fundamental role in the performance of democratic institutions: through the activation of internal and external effects they favor the working of the institutions. In my opinion, the community created by participating in the news groups can play a similar role by contributing the increase in political participation in modern societies. This kind of community, in fact, originates from the citizen's need to have a forum in which to discuss politics with all interested people. It is a need that becomes even more relevant if one keeps in mind the effects provoked by the process of secularization of politics in western societies. The creation of a community founded on the shared interest in talking about politics can be regarded, then, as a useful indicator to test the condition of relations between civic and political societies in a country.

Furthermore, the virtual community created by the regular visitors displays significant similarities to the communities intended in the traditional sense: it makes possible the origin of interpersonal relations (Parks, 1996), forms cohesive social groups (Hill, Hughes, 1997), and facilitates "a shared discourse among people who differ and would not normally interact" (Schmitz, Rogers, Phillips, Paschal, 1995, pp. 41–42). Such community makes a relevant contribution to the democratic life of a country by putting people with profoundly different experience and belief in contact, teaching them tolerance and reciprocal respect, allowing public discussion about issues felt to be relevant, and offering an opportunity for forming public opinion.

A final perspective that deserves to be mentioned refers to the innovation of the communicative product represented by the news group. A by-product of recent technological development, it is characterized not only as a narrow-casted product but also as a product in which producers and receivers come together. Alternatively, the subjects take the role either of one who produces communication or of one who receives communication. Though in the past the active role of the audience in the creation of the meaning of the messages had been underlined (Fiske, 1987), it is only today that it becomes crucial in actually producing communication. The asymmetry of the communicative relations activated by the traditional media is, in this case, entirely nullified and changes in a real symmetry between the involved subjects.

In conclusion, news groups appear to be able to significantly contribute to the transformation of the communicative process. They also appear to be able to contribute to the revitalization of the relation between citizens and politics. Precisely because of such capability, it is hoped that access to the knowledge needed to use new technologies can be assured for all citizens in a condition of substantial equality. News group participants enjoy the condition of equality. The same equality should be available in the access of new technology.

Endnotes

1. The data referred to the presence of PC in Italy show how they have grown from 6,341,000 as of March 1997 to 6,912,000 as of September 1997 (Source: Osservatorio Alchera, September 1997).

2. The subjects that only read the messages without ever sending any are called "lurkers." There are no quantitative data about their presence or about the reasons for their passive behavior, but it could raise the same problems traceable in the case of passive audiences of the television sitcom (Morris, Ogan, 1996).

3. These groups are identifiable by the suffix "politics."

4. On the flaming phenomenon in computer mediated communication, cfr. Lea, O'Shea, Fung, Spears (1992).

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