

**Niels Brügger & Henrik Bødker (eds.)**

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# **The Internet and Society?**

**Skrifter fra Center for Internetforskning  
Papers from The Centre for Internet Research**



# **The Internet and Society?** **Questioning Answers and Answering Questions**

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Skrifter fra Center for Internetforskning  
Papers from The Centre for Internet Research  
Aarhus, Denmark 2002

Published by The Centre for Internet Research, Aarhus, March 2002.

Editorial board: Niels Brügger, Henrik Bødker, Rune Dalgaard, Claus Elmholdt, Jakob Linnaa.

Niels Brügger & Henrik Bødker (eds.): *The Internet and Society?  
Questioning Answers and Answering Questions*

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Printed at Trøjborgtrykkeriet, The Faculty of Arts, University of Aarhus.

Cover design: Thomas Andreasen

ISBN: 87-91163-05-6

ISSN: 1601-5371

ISSN: 1601-538X (electronic version)

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# Preface

*Through the concepts of materiality, community, modernity and the public sphere, the four essays in this volume engage critically with some of the overall frames for understanding the internet-society nexus that James Slevin puts forward in *The Internet and Society* (2000).*

*Keywords: internet, media, society, culture, materiality, community, modernity, computer theory, interface, public sphere, democracy.*

The appearance of a new medium calls forth multiple questions and answers from diverse quarters and perspectives. In order to bring such exchanges forward it requires someone daring to propose a larger construction within which the ongoing discussions can be framed. This is precisely what James Slevin did with *The Internet and Society* (2000); and what follows are four responses to Slevin's proposed frame for an understanding of the society-internet nexus. Being the initiator of the discussion, Slevin does, however, get the last word and a chance to answer the issues raised in relation to his work. The four essays questioning Slevin's answers are consequently followed by Slevin's response, thus the subtitle "questioning answers and answering questions".

This publication is in effect the proceedings of a one-day workshop, which James Slevin participated in at the Centre for Internet Research, at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, in October 2001. At his workshop, Slevin presented some of the central themes and issues of his book followed by responses and questions from the four contributors to this volume: Niels Brügger, Henrik Bødker, Niels Ole Finnemann and Jakob Linnaa Jensen — all

affiliated with the Centre for Internet Research.<sup>1</sup>

Such a vast enterprise as Slevin's attempt to set up an overall frame for the study of the internet and society obviously invites discussions related to a range of perspectives and levels, and the four essays in this volume make up an arbitrary and non-cohesive collection that lays no claim to being comprehensive. Yet, the essays do in turn raise important issues appertaining to the internet and society: Brügger calls our attention to the question of the internet's materiality, and points towards the importance of both more elaborate theorizations of the notion of materiality and more contextual studies; Bødker points out a number of aspects in relation to the oft-discussed and important question of online communities, and the central issue here concerns Slevin's reading and use of Howard Rheingold's conceptualisations of human associations via the internet; Finnemann aims at enlarging the perspective by focusing on the internet's relations to the existing media matrix, relations that he seeks to understand by seeing them in relation to earlier historical shifts linked to media and modernity; and, finally, Linaa Jensen addresses a range of important aspects and dilemmas of the democratic potentials of the internet, while simultaneously calling for more elaborate attempts to think through how these potentials might be realised in practical terms. As much as we would have liked to include discussions of some of the other themes that Slevin discusses – e.g. organisations, globalisation and regulation, as well as the wider concepts of culture and society – this has not been possible within the scope of the present publication.

It seems appropriate to end by thanking James Slevin without whom this publication had not been possible. Slevin both agreed to present his work (in words and text) and to write out in more detail his response to the four discussions of his work.

*Niels Brügger and Henrik Bødker  
University of Aarhus, March 2002*

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1. The oral presentations at this workshop can be downloaded at  
[http://cfi.imv.au.dk/cfi/arrangementer/ekst/0110/slevin\\_program.html](http://cfi.imv.au.dk/cfi/arrangementer/ekst/0110/slevin_program.html)

# The Internet and Society: Central Themes and Issues

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In spite of all the talk, the internet is a medium that remains only poorly understood. Why should this be? Most observers seem to echo Manuel Castells, who argues that this is due to the pace of change in our modern information environments and to the lack of an adequate supply of empirical studies of the internet (Castells 2001, 3). These reasons may well be valid ones, but my response to the current state of debate about the internet is different. In my book: *The Internet and Society*, I argue that while uncertainty about the impact of such a sophisticated communication technology undoubtedly exists, what we lack is a social theory of the internet. We urgently need to find concepts and frameworks that can help us to develop a more critical understanding of the internet and continue to remain critical of what we find.

Many debates about the internet do not really advance much beyond the level of two opposing sides taking almost completely contradictory views about its significance. In one corner, we find what we might call the internet radicals who push the claim that by using the internet we are entering into a new era of opportunity in which we can live our lives on the screen. They seem to suggest



that the possibilities for communication are infinite. On the other corner, we find what we might call the internet skeptics, who warn of the onset of a terrible nightmare in which many people will find themselves disconnected and irrelevant to the important things that go on in their world. Sometimes overly optimistic and pessimistic thoughts are voiced by one and the same person.

While we might like the idea of different people holding very different opinions, this kind of understanding is not very satisfactory given the severity of challenges that we face today, both on the level of world society and institutions, and on the level of our personal lives. Current understanding of the internet does not help us to confront the problems and maximize the opportunities that this new communication technology brings to the fore. The opposite views held about the internet either leave us feeling paralyzed by the sheer wealth of opportunity that confronts us or overwhelmed by developments over which we have lost all control.

My central aim in writing *The Internet and Society* is to contribute to a systematic theoretical reflection on the internet and its impact on who we are, what we do and the way we do things together. By reflecting on problems of both a theoretical and practical nature my hope is to begin to break the stranglehold that existing debates have tended to place on our understanding of the internet.

This aim is pursued in three related steps. First, in order to understand the internet we must start by comprehending some of the cultural changes that are taking place in society today. Second, if we want to make sense of the way in which the internet might impact on these cultural changes then we must study how the internet is involved in cultural transmission. Third, in order to demonstrate critically the explanatory value of these concepts and frameworks, we must seek out some examples of internet use and relate these concepts and frameworks to existing debates.

In the first step, I argue that the internet has not come about by accident under the institutional developments of late modernity. In doing so, I relate the rise of the internet to what Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lasch, each in their own way, call the thesis of '*reflexive modernization*' (Beck, Giddens &

Lasch 1994). The internet is part of the technological base of modern society and it is particularly important to its constitution and development. As such, the internet is bound up with the workings of what these theorists see as the intensification of globalization, the rise of post-traditional forms of organization, and the intensification of reflexivity — all of which are generating a wide range of possible futures, some positive, some negative, which no one completely understands. The origins of what Beck calls the '*world risk society*' can be traced to these fundamental transformations (Beck 1999). The institutional developments of late modernity call for a reorientation of perspectives and strategies for dealing with life today. In this context, the internet can be understood to bring new burdens but also to offer new opportunities for dealing with risk in an active way.

Talking about the relevance of the thesis of 'reflexive modernization' is one thing. Applying it to aid our understanding of the impact of the internet is another. Claims concerning the institutional developments of late modernity often involve rather sweeping generalizations. We need to consider critically what becomes of these generalizations when we connect them to people and organizations in real life situations. Relating these generalizations to the internet may even help us to better understand what these claims mean.

In the second step, I explain how we might approach the internet as a modality of cultural transmission. Such an approach will help us understand how the internet is facilitating a reorganization of information and social relationships across time and space. Most existing studies of the internet have either tended to study online culture, treating the wider institutional developments as a mere backdrop, or they have studied the wider institutional developments without relating them properly to what goes on online. There are, however, traces of a systematic effort to develop a social theory of communication technologies that can help us attend to this problem. These can be found from the 1960s onwards, when those studying communication technologies and society began to allot a more central role to the interlocking concepts of culture and communication. The roots of these attempts go even further back. I argue that John Thompson's theory of cultural transmission, informed critically by these

ideas, is particularly relevant to overcoming the deficiencies of existing studies of the internet (cf. Thompson 1990 and Thompson 1995).

While Thompson does not himself study the internet, his ideas are particularly relevant because they allow us to consider it comprehensively in terms of the technical medium, the content of interaction, the socially structured contexts in which content is produced and received, and the way in which it allows us to make ourselves available to distant others. The internet can thus be seen as not just simply an alternative means of distributing information but also as a way of creating new forms of action and interaction.

In the third step, I relate an account of the internet as a modality of cultural transmission to the theories of modernity by critically examining some central themes in internet studies. These are the internet and forms of human association, organizations, the self and experience in everyday life, publicness, globalization and regulation.

My work on *The Internet and Society* draws heavily but critically on the work of Anthony Giddens, John Thompson, Zygmunt Bauman, and a wide range of others. Given the strong presence of these theorists, I consider my own contribution to be one of drawing these works together and critically applying them to the study of the internet. More modestly, I hope that this endeavor may feed back into the further development of their perspectives. Critical reviews of my work have appeared by Mary Croarken, Lincoln Dahlberg, Mark Poster, and Leonard Ashley.<sup>2</sup> In this paper from The Center for Internet Research, University of Aarhus, I am very grateful for the critical reading and comment on my work by Niels Brügger, Henrik Bødker, Niels Ole Finnemann and Jakob Linaa Jensen. I am sure that their contributions will add much to the debate. Together with their critique of my views, plus my response which follows, I hope that their contributions will help clarify my arguments in relation to the central themes and issues I have just referred to.

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2. Mary Croarken, in: *Business History*, vol. 43, April 2001 Number 2. Lincoln Dahlberg, in: *Convergence* 2001 vol. 7 Number 1. Mark Poster, in: *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4, 2, 2001. Leonard Ashley, in: *Journal of Geolinguistics*, vol. 26, 2000.

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# Does the Materiality of the Internet Matter?

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Does the materiality of the Internet matter? With this question as a guideline I shall try to comment on one specific – but in my view, fundamental – theoretical point in *The Internet and Society*, namely the role of the materiality of the internet. My aim is to find out what is said about this question, in order to continue – and maybe supplement – a fundamental train of thought from the book.

## THE MATERIALITY OF THE INTERNET

I will start with a quotation from the very first page of *The Internet and Society*. Here, the overall argument is identified by insisting:

that we can only understand the impact of the internet on modern culture if we see that symbolic content and online interaction are embedded in social and historical contexts of various kinds. (Slevin, ix)

I agree on this point. Symbolic content as well as online interaction (which is the content and the use of the internet) have to be understood in their relation to social and historical contexts. But I would like to add one more component:

the material being of the internet. In order to fully understand the content and use of the internet – as well as the social and historical context surrounding it, and which it creates – we must make the material being of the internet part of our theory and of our analysis.

I would argue that content and use as well as the social and historical context are *all* embedded in the *material context*, the material being of the internet. And this 'embeddedness' is to be understood as a dialectic. On the one hand, the material being of the internet sets up the frames or conditions for the content and use of the internet, but on the other hand, the actual content and use affect its being. One might say that the being of the internet sets up a potential range of possibilities, of which some are actualized by use – a use that then might transform the being of the internet, setting up new frames, etc. The material being of the internet is therefore both condition for and result of the actual use. And therefore it has to be taken into consideration as an essential part of the theoretical framework and analyses.<sup>3</sup>

This also seems to be the point of view of *The Internet and Society*. In the

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3. In the article "Theoretical Reflections on Media and Media History" (Brügger 2002) I suggest a theoretical framework for an analysis of the being of a medium (its *mediacy*), focusing on the material being, the potential and actual being, and on the dialectic relations between potentiality/actuality as well as between the medium and its 'surroundings'. In *The Internet and Society* the themes of the being of the internet, its potentialities and its dialectic are also present when James Slevin focusses on the characteristics of the internet (cf. p. 11, 85), when he mentions its potential (cf. p. 5, 7, 17, 54, 63, etc.) and the dialectic (cf. p. 90, 110, 113, 114). But in most cases these issues are only mentioned briefly, without being elaborated on or made an inherent part of the analyses; and the question of the potentialities of the internet in particular could have been studied within a broader perspective: on the one hand it is reduced to a question of *two* potentialities (cf. "ambivalent potential" (p. 5), "ambivalence of the potential of modern communication. It is clearly capable of both unifying and fragmenting..." (p. 17), "one set of effects or their opposite" (p. 54), "the ambivalent potential of internet technology" (p. 134)), and on the other hand, there is very little discussion of what makes some of the potentialities actual, and others not. One might argue that the internet has more than two potentialities, and that it would be worth elaborating on why some have been actualized instead of others (for instance by looking at the relation between the internet and its various social and historical contexts...).

important chapter 3, in which the book's theoretical standpoint is outlined, taking John B. Thompson's "modalities of cultural transmission" as point of departure, one reads the following:

The technical medium of transmission, Thompson argues, consists of the *material components* [my emphasis] by virtue of which information and other symbolic content are produced, transmitted and received. It is important to take these into account when examining the cultural impact of a medium because, as Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan claim, the nature of social interaction may be affected by the very form of this *material substratum* [my emphasis]. (Slevin, 62)

This is one of the most important passages of the book as regards the discussion that I am trying to initiate here. If I understand it correctly the point is – in continuation of Thompson – that, among other things, we have to focus on the technical means of transmission when we want to analyze the 'modalities of cultural transmission'. The means that are used for transmitting culture must be part of the analysis of the culture transmitted; and these means must be understood as 'material components', 'material substratum'. Again, I agree. We must make the materiality of the internet part of our theory as well as part of our analyses. Consequently, this formulation must lead us to expect the following three things in the rest of the book:

1. Theoretical reflections elaborating on and specifying what 'material components', 'material substratum' could be in general.
2. A general reflection on – or analysis of – the specific material being of the internet.<sup>4</sup>
3. That the general reflections on, as well as the general analysis of the specific material being of the internet play a key role in all the analyses of the internet throughout the book.

After a careful reading of *The Internet and Society*, I do not think that these expectations are fully met.

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4. One might maintain that 'material components' and 'material substratum' are Thompson's words, not Slevin's, but since they are made pivotal in chapter 3, and since they are not contradicted, I will consider 'material components' and 'material substratum' part of Slevin's conceptual framework.



I have not found much concerning the first point. In fact, this is a bit striking, since the 'material components' were supposed to play a key role. But, what should in fact be understood by 'material components'? Is it the machines? The technology? The bodies of the users? The objects, the artefacts – seen as a material culture? And if yes: What 'parts' of it? Focusing on what?<sup>5</sup>

I did find a little bit more concerning the second point. But it is neither very precise, nor very elaborated; it can be summarized into three categories:

- That the internet is digital (p. 63, 64).
- That it can handle different symbolic formats (text, sound, images, p. 63, 65).
- And that it consists of various applications, programs, browsers (p. 62-63, 64).

I am not quite sure whether these three are considered 'material components' or not. And if they are: why, then? And how are they merged into each other? In other words, not much is said about the specific material being of the internet. And concerning, for instance, the concrete artefacts, I have found only very few phrases where they are mentioned.<sup>6</sup> In my opinion, the concrete devices are precisely one – important – element in what could be understood as 'material components'.

Concerning the third aspect – that the general reflections on 'material components' as well as the general analysis of the specific material being of the internet should play a key role in the various analyses of the internet throughout the book – it is, of course, difficult to know whether it plays a role or not, since what is understood by 'material components' has not been specified very clearly. But what is, in fact, analyzed? What are the many examples in the book about? What is analyzed is mostly chat, e-mail/news groups, personal

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5. Is it a kind of ethnographic perspective (e.g. as seen in some of the studies of material culture in Miller 1998)? Or is it a very broad perspective, approaching what Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer calls 'materialities of communication' (cf. Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer 1994)?

6. Cf. "not forgetting the hardware in the form of computers, monitors and printers..." (p. 64) and "... the computer screen itself..." (p. 65). None of these are made an integrated part of the analyses.

homepages and/or websites. But these examples either concern the transfer of information from one person to another through the internet, or how the internet is used by the users. What is analyzed is *content* (information) and *use*, but not 'material components' or 'material substratum'. The materiality of the chats/websites etc. — and of the internet — seems to have disappeared. Or at least it is not as prevalent as the theoretical framework makes us believe it should be.<sup>7</sup>

Let me summarize these points. James Slevin is right to emphasize that the materiality of the internet should be taken into account, but what I find missing is:

- a) An elaborated theoretical reflection on what 'material substratum' could be in general.
- b) A reflection on, or an analysis of what 'material substratum' is when speaking of the internet.
- c) And finally a closer relation between the general reflections on 'material components' and the various analyses throughout the book.

## **WHAT IS THE INTERNET?**

What I would like to do now is to outline one way of understanding the material being of the internet, that is, suggest an answer to the second of the three themes just mentioned: what can be said about the 'material components' of

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7. It could be maintained that the insistence, throughout the book, on technologies as framers of time-space is part of an analysis of the material being of the internet (cf., for instance, "... individuals and organizations do not just use media 'in' time-space, they use it to organize time-space", p. 70). Undoubtedly the basic point about time-space is right, but in *The Internet and Society* it is based on an 'analysis' that is too abstract, too far away from what it promises us to be close to, the actual, material objects. I would argue that technologies/media are indeed organizers of time-space, but this feature is closely linked to their actual material being: how heavy/light are they? How much/little space do they occupy, and how? How do they relate to the space around them? Is the durability long or short (also in a historical perspective)? How much time does it take to 'use' the medium? And how quickly or slowly can the medium be moved? Etc.

the internet (theoretically and/or analytically)?

In doing so, I will begin with one of the big questions: what is the internet, as a medium, i.e., the medium 'internet' as such?<sup>8</sup> Speaking of the medium 'internet' as such means that I make an analytical distinction between:

- the medium
- the content, the use(rs), the forms of expression, the reference, and the context (social, historical, or other...)

It is, of course, obvious that when the internet is 'in use', all of these elements are always there, but for analytical purposes I would argue that one can talk about the internet as a medium – in order to focus on the media materiality. A media materiality that, then, 'carries'/'contains' the content and the forms of expression. When I ask: what is the internet? – I mean in fact: what characterizes the medium 'internet' *as such*? This also means that when I speak of the medium 'internet', it has nothing to do with browsers, windows or the like. And it has nothing to do with the exact use of the internet as a medium (as e-mail, telephone, radio, television, chat room, etc.). In my conception, browsers, windows etc. can be seen as part of the forms of expression/the content; they are not the medium 'internet' as such, but are different ways of presenting content, different ways of 'laying out' *within the internet* – and with the being of the internet. Just as the news or a daytime soap are not the medium 'television' as such, but different ways of 'coding' content within the medium 'television'.

### *The internet as medium*

The internet as a medium must be analyzed in two dimensions. On the one hand, the features that must always be there, if we are talking about the internet. And on the other hand, the features that can be there – and therefore features that can change through history, between cultures etc., that is, on the one hand, the *conditio sine qua non* that all historical and cultural forms of the internet must have, i.e., the invariant traits, and on the other hand the

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8. The following analytical distinctions, as well as the way of focusing upon the internet as medium are based on the theoretical arguments in Brügger 2002.

historical and cultural specific forms in which these invariant traits are found. It is important to stress that the two dimensions are entangled, although they can – and must – be separated analytically. The invariant traits of the internet are only there if there are historical and cultural forms of the internet, and the historically and culturally specific forms of the internet are always variations on the basis of the invariant traits. Therefore, an exhaustive analysis of the internet as a medium must consider both dimensions. Let me now try to isolate these two dimensions of the medium 'internet'.

*The invariant traits of the internet*

The internet must have at least the following three characteristics, no matter in what historical or cultural form one meets it:

- It is composed of computers,
- These computers are directly connected,
- When connected, they are able to recognize one another and to communicate by means of a shared system of addresses and a shared language – in other words: a protocol.

What are the consequences of these three points?<sup>9</sup>

The first consequence is that, since computers are an essential part of the internet, the internet 'inherits' the invariant properties characterizing the computer. In accordance with the work of my colleague Niels Ole Finnemann, the invariant properties of the computer are (cf. Finnemann, 8):

- A mechanical (binary) alphabet consisting of a finite set of letters, each of which is void of semantic content
- An algorithmic syntax
- And an interface

None of these are necessary in a specific form, but they are necessary as such. There must be some kind of mechanical alphabet, some kind of algorithmic

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9. It is obvious that the internet has these three traits in common with other phenomena, e.g., local networks; therefore the difference between the internet and a local network is part of the other dimension of the analysis, the historically or culturally specific forms of these invariant traits.

syntax and some kind of interface.

The second consequence is that direct interconnectedness is necessary, but there is no specific form of direct connectivity common to every possible form of the internet; new interconnections can be introduced, but there must be direct connectedness.

The third consequence is that there must be some kind of system for addressing and exchanging data. And again: The protocol need not be common to every possible form of the internet; new protocols can be introduced, but there must be a protocol.

### **The (Im)materiality of the Internet**

Considering the other dimension of the internet – the historical and cultural dimension – the fundamental questions are: what material forms do the computers actually have? How are the material connections actually made? And what ways of addressing and shared languages are actually used?

My purpose in this paper is not to answer these questions by carrying out an analysis, but just to sketch what the objects of an analysis should be. First, the concrete objects of analysis should be the artefacts that actually constitute the internet. Second, the analytical object should be the actual material being of these objects. A few words about these two.

First of all – like Harold Innis – we should analyze the actual objects, the artefacts, and in the case of the internet, this would be:

- Various forms of computers (mainframe computers, personal computers, portable PCs, palm pilots, WAP phones, etc.)
- The ways in which they are directly connected (by electricity-based devices such as cables (copper, optical...), light (infrared, Bluetooth...), sound waves, satellites, modems..., and by computers as 'intermediate stations')
- And the ways in which they actually communicate (the many various protocols (tcp, ip, smtp, ftp, http, etc.))

And, secondly, we have to analyze these objects with respect to their material being. Here, one has to stress one very important aspect, namely that the material being of most parts of the internet is split into two (since all these

historically and culturally specific forms of the internet are computers):

- On the one hand, their physical substance is various combinations of metal, plastic, glass, light and energy/electricity for moving mechanical parts, etc.
- But on the other hand, their physical substance is energy/electricity, serving as the basis of the binary alphabet, with which both data and syntax are written

The matter of the internet therefore is a combination of materiality and what I would call *immateriality*, using this word to designate the energy-based binary alphabet. What is unique to the material being of the internet is, that it has these two 'kinds' of materiality: The material materiality and the immaterial materiality. And this has to be taken into consideration because both of these two materialities (as well as their relation) set up — each in their own way — the material frames for the possible content, the possible use(rs), for the possible social/historical context, etc. The various forms of this 'double materiality' within the different concrete objects, the artefacts that constitute the internet, should be an integrated part of any analysis of the internet. But it must be stressed that this is only a part of a more complete analysis; an analysis of the material substratum reveals the frames that the other elements — the content, the users etc. — have to deal with. Therefore, in my view, we must analyze:

- a) The concrete forms of the double materiality within the concrete artefacts,
- b) The content, the use(rs), the forms of expression, the reference, and the context (social, historical, or other...),
- c) And the mutually conditioning relations between a) and b).

The title of this brief comment on *The Internet and Society* is a question: "Does the materiality of the Internet matter?" And in order to answer this question I would argue that we have to:

- Reflect theoretically on the media materiality of the internet.
- And integrate these reflections in our analyses as sketched above.

And therefore my answer to the question would be: yes, the materiality of the internet matters. We just have to analyze *how* it matters.

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# Rheingold, Slevin and the Online Community as Organism

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The ensuing discussion revolves around the notion of community as described by Howard Rheingold – primarily in *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier* (1993) – and James Slevin’s engagement with these ideas in *The Internet and Society* (2000). Rheingold’s description and Slevin’s critique can both – as the above title shows – be seen in relation to the notion of (an) organism, and it is from this perspective that my dialogue with Slevin will revolve.

The central issue here is thus how the notion of an organism, or more precisely, organic growth may help us understand Rheingold’s perception of online communities; and my main argument, as will become clear, is that if this notion is helpful at all, it must mean something rather different than what it does in Slevin’s reading. Rather than treating Rheingold’s use of organic growth as a metaphor pointing to biological processes in a rather strict sense (as Slevin does), I will suggest an approach that addresses the issue from a more phenomenological and historical perspective.

What I seek to draw attention to is the ways in which Rheingold’s



(relatively) early and agenda-setting conceptualisations of internet communities seem to be rooted in specific historical experiences and cultural practices, and the ways in which a closer look at these experiences, practices as well as their conceptualisations may suggest new ways of understanding not only Rheingold but also mediated communities. One way of approaching this is to use the notion of a rock community as an entry point into understanding the internet communities as outlined by Rheingold. Such a reading by historical analogy is in fact not far from what Rheingold himself practices, although the outcome is rather different.

It is largely Rheingold's experiences on (or with) the online community The WELL that lie behind his conceptualisations in *The Virtual Community* and it is also this particular setting that suggests the importance of popular music. The WELL, says Rheingold, was 'rooted in the San Francisco Bay area and in two separate cultural revolutions that took place there in the past decades' (Rheingold 1993a, 39). The first of these was the Haight-Asbury counterculture that lay behind Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, an 'access to tools and ideas to all communards', or in Brand's own words: an 'access-to-tools compendium' (Brand 1987); the second cultural revolution was that instigated by the personal-computer pioneers in the late seventies. In the account of Rheingold these two cultural revolutions are seen as intricately linked in the sense that they share the visions of emancipation in terms of both politics and consciousness that emerged in and grew out of the sixties. But whereas the latter 'revolution' (at least to some extent) constituted a means, the former was and somehow continued to be an end, namely that of communal and self-sufficient living.

The WELL was thus to begin with primarily populated by the '*Whole Earth Crowd*', partly, according to Cliff Figallo, because of the 'important promotional value of constant mention in the small but influential *Whole Earth Review* magazine' (Figallo 1995, 52). This 'crowd' was, however, soon joined by a group of computer and programming enthusiasts as well as a big group of 'Deadheads', 'the subculture that had grown up around the band the Grateful Dead'. Rheingold points out that the 'Deadheads' knew 'instinctively how to use the

system to create a community among themselves'. In fact, this part of the WELL was so successful that 'for the first several years, Deadheads were by far the single largest source of income for the enterprise'. To what extent these separate groups intermingled is not entirely clear. In any case, they had their 'origins in the milieu', and Rheingold furthermore asserts that those 'Deadheads who did 'go over the wall' [to the other parts of the WELL] ended up having a strong influence on the Well at large' (Rheingold 1993a, 49).

Rheingold is, however not very specific here. What was it specifically that the Deadheads brought with them? Was it the instinct for community building? Or was it simply that this kind of music-related community was well-g geared for this kind of social interaction in the sense that they brought with them a sense of communion created through concerts, records and tapes? That they, in other words, were especially good at imagining communion in relation to shared media. Or, finally, was it simply that music as such was one of the primary common denominators/disseminators or icons of the environment that Rheingold talks about? This may hold at least part of the explanation. The common ground may thus be described as the shared experience of an advancing community through, exemplified or symbolized by music and its slow dissemination and/or corporate take-over. It is partly, I will argue, in relation to this and related historical and social processes that Rheingold's use of the frontier metaphor must be understood, a term also employed by a number of other observers.<sup>10</sup>

The notion of a "rock" community has been developed in relation to a set of historically specific uses of the "genre" of rock music in the late sixties. Or put differently: the highly visible uses of popular music within what loosely may be described the counter-culture in the late sixties have given rise to a range of efforts to conceptualize the relations between mass-mediated (commercial) music and counter-cultural communities. And part of these conceptualizations obviously emanate from people, who had a close relation to music in these

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10. There are a number of accounts in which this and similar phrases occur: Peter Ludlow, *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier* (Camb. MIT Press, 1996) and Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and disorder on the electronic frontier* (New York. Bantam Books, 1992), to mention just a couple.

formative years, and who later found themselves in positions to propagate certain idealised relations between communities, music and industry. This (historical) construction of community revolved around notions of individuality (freedom), authenticity, oppositionality and shared experiences, and that seen from both the side of production and that of consumption.

It is thus largely, to condense a long argument elaborated elsewhere, the rise, growth and death of rock communities – or *the* (rock) community – that lies behind Rheingold's use of the frontier metaphor, and thus also behind his notion of organic growth.<sup>11</sup> As the counter-cultural (music-glued) community is caught in the twin pulls of the esoteric and the mainstream, so is the (electronic) frontier community caught between the potentials and benefits of the "virtual" and the demands of localised sociality, or, between the open (and moving) spaces of the virtual frontier and the more sedimented and long-lasting structures of more committed emotional binds. The analogy that I am stressing here is thus that between moments when the community is in a felt and defining opposition while growing (rapidly). This is of course a fragile moment that has to be continuously recreated, and it is worth noticing that Rheingold is in the business of creating (not sustaining) internet communities. Once they become too successful, that is, too big, he moves on to the next project.

The "moment" that I am talking about here is thus an "organic" moment in the sense that it is unavoidably linked to a life cycle. It is thus a moment of organic growth/decay in the sense that it derives its meaning from the inevitable movement away from what it was and towards something which it is not, and which furthermore – if given the appropriate time – means death. This process is, however, obviously not "automatic" and inevitable in any real biological sense. That such communities (might) grow (like an organism) is due to industrious individuals like Rheingold, who successfully align themselves with existent cultural sentiments and continuities (as I have hinted at above). This is mainly the reason that they can grow so quickly. The organic is not here

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11. This argument is elaborated in my "The Counter-Cultural Frontier or the online community as frozen movement", which is currently under review for publication in *New Media & Society*.

something that "happens behinds peoples' backs", "propelled by uncontrollable needs" or because of some "mysterious biological attraction" as in Slevin's reading (against which he "promotes" the view of the "intelligent agent").<sup>12</sup> That a community grows like an organism, a bacteria in a petri dish does not necessarily mean that the individual participants do not know what they are doing. As far as I can see, there is nothing in Rheingold that sustains a reading along such lines. That the continuos search for the specific "organic" moment may undermine the very notion of the organic is obviously a sustained or inevtiable danger; that is preceisely why Rheinggold as well as actual online communitis must be studied in their historical contexts.

As I hope may have become clear by now, my main argument with Slevin, as with many of the others that engage in a critique of Rheingold, is that the actual historicity, the situatedness of the argument in both a historical and cultural sense, is largely neglected; I am of course aware that in a wide-ranging book like Slevin's every issue cannot be dealt with in all its details; yet if such historical arguments are not brought into the discussion, a book like Rheingold's may continue to play a role that is disproportionate to its actual context and methodology.

The application of the standards of theoretical sociology to Rheingold is to a large extent counter-productive, I will argue. First of all, Rheingold's book is by most standards not research, as I have already pointed out. What it is, is a personal, and passionate part in the discussion of competing visions as to what the internet might do. If one should have addressed Rheingold as Slevin does, I think it would have been more appropriate to approach and discuss sociologically-inflected studies that have taken Rheingold as their point of departure. To what extent such studies actually exist, I do not know. And if they do not, the problem that I have just sketched out is even more pertinent.

If, and I have a feeling that that is the case, Rheingold mainly have been agenda-setting among people actually forming online-communities (and not those studying them), an approach through cultural history might be even more

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12. See Slevin (2000), pp. 106-107.

appropriate. Afterall, Rheingold is to some extent more a user/participant than a theoretically informed observer. If this is so, there is certainly a mismatch between Slevin's call for "intelligent agents" (which he sees excluded by Rheingold) and Slevin's own theoretical approach in the sense that Slevin indirectly scolds Rheingold (the user) for not being theoretically informed, that is, for not being an "intelligent agent".

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# **Perspectives on the Internet and Modernity**

## **Late Modernity, Postmodernity or Modernity Modernized?**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Let me start by saying that I consider Slevin's book one of those that would be missed if it were not written. It would be very strange if we did not have an account of the internet and society seen in the perspective of Anthony Giddens' work on modernity and extending John B. Thompson's analysis of the mass media by embracing the internet.

I also welcome the book because of its critical stance towards attempts to see both the computer and the internet as – more or less isolated and fragmented – incarnations of postmodern philosophy. Such positions seem to be based on a very traditional kind of avantgardism, unfounded optimism and futurism – or what Slevin has called the position of the radicals – positions close to what Langdon Winner has named "cyberlibertarianism", which he describes as a "collection of ideas that links ecstatic enthusiasm for electronically medi-

ated forms of living with radical, right wing libertarian ideas about the proper definition of freedom, social life, economics, and politics in the years to come" (Winner, 1997).

A valuable quality of Slevin's book is that the internet is put into a wider social and cultural perspective, and that he, while doing this, at least in some respects is also able to counterbalance Manuel Castells' more dystopian analysis of the schisms of the network society.

So, there are a number of questions and discussions we will not have now, because I am in agreement with much of what Slevin says. However, concerning Castells, I am still not quite sure that we are justified in concluding that he is completely mistaken in his perspectives. He may be more sceptical than one would wish, but even if Slevin does not subscribe to his pessimism, he must still confront a number of the questions that Castells raises. However, I will not go into this debate here. Instead I would like to focus on the relationship between media and modernity.

## **THE INTERFACE INTO WHAT KIND OF MACHINE?**

I will take my point of departure by quoting a few lines from Slevin's book, where the attitude towards the postmodern position of Sherry Turkle and others is stated.

"Finally", Slevin writes, "I want to dispute the notion of the internet as the embodiment of postmodern theory, the claim that the so-called 'virtual communities' are the result of processes which are propelling us beyond modernity into what both Reid and Turkle refer to as postmodernity" (pp. 107-108). In the following Slevin very clearly demonstrates what is meant.

Sherry Turkle identifies modernity with the idea of a machine "which could be understood by discovering its constituent elements, for example by removing its plastic cover," [while] "today, she claims, we have moved from this modernist approach to a postmodernist approach where users stay at the surface level of representation, where all hint of the inner mechanisms of the machine is banished from view." (p. 108).

As Slevin notes, "it might be helpful here to recall the characteristics of in-

dustrial design" and indeed so, since what Turkle here identifies as postmodern, the hiding of the machinery behind a facade of design, is a genuine part of a modern (design- and camouflage) tradition, which can be traced back, at least to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> So, we can refute her argument of a transition into postmodernity. But we do so by accepting her analysis of the interface.

What then, if Sherry Turkle is also wrong because she does not get the interface question right? Let me try to answer this by criticising her understanding of the interface, and thereby also showing that the functioning of the computer interface actually makes the computer into a machine of a different kind than those well known machines of the previous industrial society.

In the case of computers, the interface is not simply a cover hiding the inner mechanisms. Rather, it is the entrance to the machine, and thereby represents a level through which you design, construct, control and interact with the machine. Instead of being merely a design cover hiding the machine, it is a complex communication system of devices and symbols through which we are able to perform all sorts of operations. It can be described as a selected set of operational facilities offered to the user, but it is also and always integrated into, and hence a part of the machinery itself. And it is an essential part, since the interface does not simply allow us to control the specific machine, it also allows us to change or even replace the functional architecture of that same machine. This is why real computers are close to what Alan Turing defined as the universal computer – of the kind he christened a "choice machine" if the possibility of giving new inputs during the processes was used (Turing, 1936). According to this, a computer is a machine in which the functional architecture is not – as in previously known machines – built into the physical, invariant structure of the machine, but delivered as editable, reprogrammable software.

I have described this at length elsewhere, and here I will only add that this makes the computer both a new kind of machine, and a new kind of medium, operating by means of a new kind of sign system. This sign system or system of representation is basically defined by what we can describe as triple articula-

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13. On cubism and the origin of the idea of military camouflage see Kern 1983, 303.



tion, compared to the well known system of double articulation in ordinary language:

- There is a binary alphabet which can be deliberately coded into letters, numbers, mathematical rules, pictures, sounds, or whatsoever, by means of:
- one set or another of hierarchically ordered formalisms (e.g. ASCII codes for letters, math functions defining pixels for images as well as mathematical rules, etc.)
- and which are editable and controllable by an interface (keyboard, screen, virtual reality devices, or other in-out-devices).

The basic features of the interface stem from the fact that it is manifested and processed in the machine in exactly the same way as all programmes and all sorts of data, i.e., as processes performed by means of sequences of bits.

Now, let us turn from this specific account of the computer to a more general question which I would like to discuss: namely whether it is possible to analyse the internet without caring much about the basic fact that the internet is constituted by a set of connected computers, and hence based on the underlying principles of digital media?

I will follow this question a few steps towards some reflections on the relationship between media and modernity.

## **THE INTERNET AND THE MATRIX OF MEDIA**

Somewhere in the book Slevin explains that the social impact of the internet has more to do with social relations than technical matters and the properties of the devices. Quoting Wittgenstein: "The meaning of social interaction is intrinsically involved with situated social practices", Slevin continues, saying that

We need to combine, in a systematic way, a concern for virtual communities and a concern for socially structured contexts and processes within which individuals constituting these social relationships are situated. (p. 109).

Here again Slevin takes the postmodern idea of virtual communities as a rele-

vant point of departure, where I would suggest that the properties of the medium would be a more appropriate starting point. Once again, I wonder why Slevin accepts the postmodern notion as valid? And I would like to argue that the notion of a virtual community is inaccurate, precisely because the properties of the medium are ignored or falsely conceived of.

Most of what is said about virtual communities (e.g. that they allow us to be anonymous, that we can play with our identity, that we can communicate at a distance with people we do not know, etc.) could also be said about communities based on textual communication, such as the so-called learned republic in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, or a huge number of communities which have formed themselves around a set of common texts, journals, magazines, and possibly letters in writing, or even phone calls.

The text, too, constitutes a virtual space, allowing you to be anonymous, to play with your identity, to tell tales, to create fictional universes, and most of everything else said to be characteristic of the new medium for communication over distance.

That this is often overlooked is very strange, since the text constitutes the basic medium of all modern societies, including the present epoch – and including most of the virtual communities formed around the net. I wonder, how it is possible to present these well-known features of the textual universe as constituting a set of unique new features of a new medium?

This does not mean to say that there is no difference between the real virtuality of printed text and of digitised representation. On the contrary, there are a number of differences, and they are all based on the properties of digital representations.<sup>14</sup> In my view, the example given forces us to focus on the specifics of the digital media if we want to understand the specific impact of the internet.

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14. Some of the most significant differences are manifested on the level of the interface: the interface allows interactivity and hypertext both in relation to the machine, to the functions performed, to the individual user and – if on the net – to the institution behind, to other pages on the same website, to the content and meaning of the site in question as well as to other websites on the net.

So, it seems that we here have a case in which ignoring the characteristics of the specific medium leads directly to false historical assumptions of what is really new.

There are other examples in Slevin's book, and they seem to follow partly as a consequence of the argument, that we do not need to care much about the properties of the medium, and partly as a consequence of his – what I would call too limited – critique of the postmoderns, since he accepts their concept of the computer, while criticising them solely for their idea that there is a change from a genuinely modern into a postmodern ideology.

Let me add a few comments on what I see as a missing link in Slevin's building the internet into a social perspective, namely the relation between the internet and other media.

I think this is an important and complicated matter, which is only touched upon very fragmentarily in Slevin's book. I believe we can identify at least the following five sorts of relationships:

1. *The internet is a medium with its own specific capacities – a medium alongside other media*

To this category belongs functions such as e-mail, chat fora, web sites, web-based virtual reality systems, hypertextual links and other, known and as yet unknown functions, which have no direct equivalent in previous media history.

2. *The computer/internet is a medium in which all older media can be simulated and hence integrated*

To this category belong electronic text, (e.g., integrating the book, the newspaper, the library) the telephone, radio, (eventually video and digital television) fax machines, and other media. Television on the internet will probably differ from both traditional television and from the well known individualised and interactive kinds of internet use. There will still be different kinds of use. We may have technological convergence, but not functional convergence.

3. *The computer/internet is a medium in which older media are absorbed*

This means that functions previously related to different media can now be deliberately blended in the computer according to our wishes (e.g., blendings/mixtures of digitised photos, drawings, graphics and other sorts of images; digitised sequences (photorealism) in films or e-mail as a blending of writing, printing and nearly real-time distance communication (as formerly known only from the phone)). To this category belongs the blend of all sorts of mediated functions, since they can all be digitised and deliberately combined.

#### *4. Refunctionalisation of older media.*

We also need to take into consideration the question of whether old media disappear when integrated, or whether they are refunctionalised, as has been the case with print media so far. The same goes for handwriting and most other means of expression.<sup>15</sup>

#### *5. The computer in the background.*

Finally, both the computer and the internet can be used "in the background" of other media, built into them without changing the external relations, as in cars, washing machines, etc., i.e., pervasive computing; in such cases the interactive use is reduced or restricted into simple signalling for the benefit of automation.

The complex character is also manifested when it comes to the wider analysis of the functions of the internet and the whole new matrix: the coexistence of these relations immediately reveals that there is a historical and dynamical process involved here – the emergence of the internet implies a reorganisation of the whole matrix of available media and all processes of communication in society.

For this reason I would argue that if we want to understand the social function of one medium at a given time, we need to take the whole matrix of available media into account. Take as an example the production and distribution of news. Today, news is published in both old and new media, and circula-

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15. For examples and further references see Finnemann 1999 and 2000.

ted among all media, which use each other as sources. Even if only a minority of the population uses the internet as their sole news source, we have already gotten a complete new system for production and circulation of news. It may not be easy to analyse, but there is a significant change. This leads me to my final comment.

## **MEDIA MODERNISING MODERNITY**

If there is a change of the whole matrix of media, then it would be reasonable to believe that there is also far-reaching general social and cultural change, which may involve more than a speeding up and intensifying of pre-existing social processes.

Probably these changes will be at least as far-reaching as the advent and development of analogue electric and electronic media since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or as far-reaching as the advent and development of movable type media in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Since all these media are also media of modern society, one may suggest that the history of modernity is more closely linked with the history of media than so far acknowledged, and maybe we should not speak of late modernity as the alternative to postmodernity, but admit the existence of several modern epochs, thus allowing us to reflect upon present processes that may be part of the formation of a new epoch of modernity. Or what I have called "modernity modernised", because these processes are based on modern, secularising epistemology, and developed within a modern conceptual framework.

If the first epoch was centred around the printing press, and the second around the telegraph, radio and television, and other analogue electronic media, then we are now confronted with a third epoch of modernity, an epoch which seems to be centred around the internet as the backbone of a new communicative infrastructure.

And going a bit beyond the agenda of today: one might assume that this third epoch of modernity is not only based on new information technology; there are also new sorts of mechanised industrial productions in physical and not least biological realms, such as nanotech and biotech. And maybe the transi-

tions of today are also better seen as transitions from a more or less coherent Western form of modernity into a set of related but differently composed modernities. Today, it seems reasonable to assume that there is also a Japanese variant, and that we are probably seeing the emergence of a Chinese variant, while still other kinds are also possible.

In this framework we should probably accept that the notion of modernity is not simply a notion of a given state of affairs, it is at the same time also a notion of an epistemological character. According to this epistemology, modern thought always relies on a set of axioms and preconditions, but these axioms and preconditions do not constitute a set of invariant or holy principles, established once and for all, and inaccessible to inquiry. On the contrary, in principle any pre-existing axiom can be moved into the field of analysis and hence made object of manipulation. Since any one axiom can only be moved in to the field of analysis — and analysed — by means of a new axiom, the history of modern thought is basically formed around the sequence of axioms moved into the field of analysis.

The most far-reaching modernizing principle is that of putting axioms formerly assumed to be given as invariants outside time and space on the agenda as editable, changeable processes, performed — and eventually manipulated — in time and space. This principle generates a history of secularisation, and a history of modernisation. In modern history, the principle has successively been applied to the notion of atoms, of immaterial forces, and of the divinely created species, and this process has now reached the very means by which the previous secularisation processes were performed, namely the axioms of eternally given natural laws, of the plasticity of human language and of the immaterial mind and human thought. Today, natural laws are considered as evolving within the system, the human language (and mental activity in general) is seen as mediated, the mind is seen as materialised in the brain, and human thought is considered to be a process taking place in time and space within the same universe as physical processes. Once again, modernity is modernised.

This would perhaps allow us to grasp the radical innovations and changes in a more appropriate way than the rather pessimistic notion of a "late" modernity

or even "post" modernity, as if the contemporary transitions do not lead anywhere, or do not touch or transcend any of the basic foundations of the previous modern epoch of nation states and welfare societies.

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# The Public Sphere, Deliberation and the Internet

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The concepts "publicity" and "public sphere" are central to democracy. The classical concept of publicity is derived from ancient Greece and linked to the physical phenomenon of the "agora", the public space where citizens met, debated and deliberated.

Another concept of the public sphere is found in Jürgen Habermas' description of 18<sup>th</sup> Century coffee houses where citizens met and discussed literature, art and politics and thereby contributed to developing democracy in the modern sense.

Both concepts seem quite ideal and more reminiscent of descriptions of a Golden Age rather than sketches of actual, historical situations, but they have nevertheless pervaded the literature about the public sphere.

James Slevin's chapter 7, "Publicness and the Internet" also takes its theoretical point of departure in this tradition and tries to discuss whether, and how the Internet will alter the public sphere.

Slevin's contribution is not the first attempt to sketch the Internet's consequences for the public sphere. His specific achievement is, however, that he is both reflective and critical toward traditional (and somewhat ideal) notions



of the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he discusses the Internet in the wider tradition of media and culture theory and hence contributes to a broadening of the picture.

In the following, I will first describe Slevin's outline of basic challenges and perspectives regarding the Internet and the public sphere. Secondly, I will go a bit further into his two important publicity concepts, namely visibility and dialogue. Thirdly, and most important, I will discuss Slevin's conditions for publicness in a specifically democratic light based upon my own distinction of the functions of the public sphere. Finally, I will further elaborate upon some interesting dilemmas and puzzles that he raises in his chapter.

## **1. CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR THE INTERNET**

Regarding the public sphere, Slevin points out that the Internet poses two challenges that are of the greatest importance for democracy:

- 1) The absence of a central legitimising point, of an absolute set of moral values.
- 2) Tendencies toward fragmentation and an ever-widening pluralism of values.

These issues are already well recognized in the literature (see e.g. Graham, 1999, 81). The Internet is nevertheless most commonly associated with promises for strengthening the public sphere. Slevin identifies two such aspects:

- 1) The promise of dialogue as opposed to normal mass media communication.
- 2) The promise of a deliberative processes enabled by the permeability of the Internet.

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16. This trend is also very clear in Henaff and Strong 2001.

## **2. CORE CONCEPTS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE — VISIBILITY AND DIALOGUE**

Having identified some of the central problems and promises, Slevin goes on to discuss the role of the Internet in relation to two central concepts of the public sphere: visibility and dialogue.

*Visibility* is a basic characteristic of a traditional, physical public sphere as in ancient Greece. The citizens see and are seen. The public sphere hence becomes a kind of a theatre, as brilliantly discussed in Villa (2001).

The history of the media is a tale of more and more mediators rendering the immediate visibility blurred. By discussing it in a media-theoretical frame, Slevin takes into account how the Internet is different from other media on a macro-level.

On the other hand, I think that interesting micro-social aspects are totally absent in the text. Identity and social relations are extremely important aspects of how the public sphere is formed. How do the normal rules of the public sphere based on visibility, at least literally, apply to the Internet, where anonymity and the absence of normal social rules are the dominant phenomena? What does it mean to social interaction on the Internet that the users in principle are anonymous and not obliged to each other as in normal communities.<sup>17</sup>

Considering *dialogue*, I agree with Slevin that Habermas' criteria for an ideal public sphere seem a bit unrealistic. They will probably not be totally fulfilled on the Internet as they are in no other mass media either. It is important to remember that dialogue can take place both in a very broad societal context of generalized communication and in narrow groups, as for example the Habermasian coffee houses.

Another point is that dialogue and deliberation are not necessarily intertwined. Deliberation can take place without a dialogue in the traditional sense of the word, a fact that scholars often tend to forget. You can deliberate when watching a debate programme or an informative program on television.

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17. A very interesting account of some of these topics is found in Sherry Turkle: *Life on the Screen, Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Although the Internet in principle facilitate dialogue in the classical sense, it has the potential of both enhancing the wider societal dialogue and contributing to personal deliberation.

### **3. DELIBERATION ON THE INTERNET — A POLITICAL READING OF SLEVIN'S CONDITIONS**

Thus moderating the clear-cut Habermasian notion of the public sphere and broadening the agenda for dialogue and deliberation on the Internet, it is time to dig deeper into the conditions and potentials for deliberation on the Internet.

When reading Slevin, I find that his discussion of deliberation lacks a more clear political focus. It is, however, striking that his conditions for deliberation fits almost perfectly into my own notion of four basic functions of the public sphere: agenda-setting, political problem-solving, deliberation, and definition of common values (Linaa Jensen 2001, 47). I will use these four concepts to read Slevin's four conditions through "political glasses".

Slevin evaluates the deliberative potential of the Internet in the light of four conditions (p. 187ff). I will run through them one by one.

- 1) *Keeping controversial questions open.* This is basically a question of free access to the process of agenda-setting. It is a crucial part of the public sphere as a lack of openness both expresses and contains an exercise of power. Bachrach and Baratz named this "non decision-making", thereby consciously keeping controversial questions out of the agenda (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970). Today, there is conscious or unconscious regulation of the political agenda, either for political purposes or, as most often, due to limited space. On the Internet the space is in the principle unlimited and there is not the same extent of editors and regulations as apply to the traditional media. If you are denied the access to established media, you can publish on the Internet.
  
- 2) *Criticizable rationality.* In Habermas' account, obtaining this condition for deliberation is a question about establishing the ideal speech

situation. Thereby political problem-solving should become possible, and the Internet thus contributes to another aspect of an ideal public sphere. Slevin states, that an ideal speech situation on the Internet is not necessarily easier obtainable than in other media. The pluralism and fragmentation of the modern society enhanced by the Internet leads to a very diverse body of views and values. Thereby the points of departure for political problem-solving become more and more spread.

- 3) *Overall goals, principles and rights.* As I read Slevin, he connects this discussion to the issue of the no longer existing central legitimising authority. Then it is no longer possible to base arguments on politics alone, you have to base them on principles. That is not an easy task as society experiences an ever-widening deconstruction of values, we once took for granted. The consequence is that deliberation becomes more and more difficult. In my opinion deliberation does not necessarily have to take its departure in the biggest moral and principal questions but rather in day-to-day discussions. Further, I think the Internet is exogenous in relation to the process of diversification of values and society in general. This discussion, however, requires a much wider context.
  
- 4) *The recognition of moral principles.* The last function of the public sphere is in my own understanding that of defining common values. Slevin examines this aspect carefully. He rightfully states that the Internet contains and poses the same moral dilemmas as other media. I might add that the Internet is still so marginal in the wider societal context that the main arena for definition and discussion of moral issues lies somewhere else. The question is whether the Internet, by nature fragmented and contingent, can in time turn into a medium for moral deliberation and recognition and thereby fulfill the function of defining common values? Only time will show, but I doubt it.

In sum, Slevin's conclusions are not surprising. Most democratic analyses point to

both the potentials and the dangers of the Internet. What is quite new is that he raises important questions about moral and values, although these are not specifically related to the rise of the Internet. The discussion about legitimation of moral stands is almost universally relevant these years.

The main problem in Slevin's chapter is that he seems to fall into the same trap as do other researchers. He has nothing to say about how the potential achievements of the Internet are to be realised in practical terms. In his eagerness to explore the deliberative potentials of the Internet, his approach almost becomes tautological: he takes for granted the positive effects of the Internet that he wants to show.

#### **4. SOME INTERESTING DILEMMAS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

This said, I would like to add that I find Slevin's chapter about publicity very interesting, as I do the rest of the book. The reason may be that the text (as is the case with most texts about the Internet) raises more questions than it answers. I would like to end this article by sketching some of the interesting dilemmas explicitly or implicitly stated in the chapter.

First, I would like to touch upon the old discussion among theorists of language, whether text as a phenomenon represents a vulgarisation of the language and hence of the ideal speech situation. If that is the case, the Internet so far poses a major threat to deliberative processes as an overwhelming majority of the communication on the Internet so far is text.

Another interesting point crops up if you take the opposite view and present a claim that is widespread among literature critics, that the text is superior to pictures. If that is indeed so, the Internet as we now know it should be ideal for deliberation. Meanwhile, the greater band-width of the future (including face to face communication) poses a threat to deliberation as more and more communication will take the form of pictures.

Although the points raised above mainly serve to exhibit the epistemological disagreements among members of the cultural elite, they should make us reflect upon the fact that the Internet is not a homogenous phenomenon. The form of communication through the physical networks can

have a decisive impact upon societal consequences.

As I have already said, I think Slevin's modification of ideal concepts of deliberation and publicity is correct. If we were to take Habermas's view to the extreme we should reflect upon the ideal speech situation and moral values every day. This contrasts day-to-day experience. We do not reflect upon moral choices or speech situations in daily life. These concepts are challenged only in critical moments, when we find ourselves in moral dilemmas or situations that demand that we make a moral choice (p. 194). Recognizing that could bring us to a more realistic concept of the public sphere and the ideal speech situation.

I would like to conclude on a point made by Slevin that I find very useful when navigating through the jungle of accounts of the Internet and its consequences. Slevin states that relations on the Internet always to a certain extent will remain based upon asymmetries of power (p. 197). That is a very controversial point since one of the big promises of the net is that it can break down barriers of power. In my opinion, the discussion about the digital divide teaches us that position, economy and education still matter, even on the "anarchic" Internet. Further, the problems of anonymity and the lack of responsibility emphasize the need for identification mechanisms that would remove the veil of invisibility from the hitherto anonymous net users and reveal their true nature.

The publicity on the Internet will increasingly remind us of publicity as we used to know it.

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# A Response

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In their commentary on *The Internet and Society*, Niels Brügger, Henrik Bødker, Niels Ole Finnemann and Jakob Linnaa Jensen raise some points of considerable importance and interest. So accurate are their descriptions of most of my views, and so generous their invitation to me to respond, that I feel unamiable in disagreeing with some of the criticisms they make. But since they have given it to me as my brief, let me now look sympathetically but critically at their comments.

## **THE TECHNICAL MEDIUM IS CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET**

All changes in systems of communication are important to the constitution and development of societies. Electronic communication has not only altered the way we communicate, it has also changed the way our societies work and are organized. The rise of the internet is a key part of the social transformations taking place in late modernity. In order to understand this, and subsequent developments, we have to approach the internet as a modality of cultural transmission. Niels Brügger is correct in saying that my analysis of the internet builds on the work of John Thompson in this respect. At the same time, this renders



rather odd Brügger's assertion that I do not give enough attention to the technical medium of transmission. As Brügger himself acknowledges, the technical medium of transmission is a key aspect in Thompson's theory. Brügger and I are therefore in full agreement that a consideration of the technical medium is central to any understanding of the internet. I also share his use of Harold Innis's work to support such an argument. It is consequently not at all clear to me why Brügger feels the need to "...add one more component: The material being of the internet" to my work.

My treatment of the technical medium of transmission is not as elusive as Brügger might seem to imply. I can only conclude that I have not emphasized the material component, as Brügger calls it, in my work in a form that he recognizes. In *The Internet and Society*, I am interested in concepts and frameworks that can be placed in the service of developing a more critical understanding of the social impact of the internet. In pursuit of this interest, I follow through what Thompson defines as the general attributes of technical media. These attributes draw our attention to the degree of fixation, the degree of circulation, and the extent of participation that the internet in various forms allows for. If we want to specify the impact of the internet on the mediatization of modern culture, then this is where I think that we should start. Having acknowledged Thompson's concern for the technical medium of transmission, Brügger, however, launches his own theoretical account of what he calls the 'materiality of the internet'. What he does not explain is why he thinks it is necessary to depart from Thompson's attributes of the technical medium. It is obvious that Brügger cannot find his account of the "material components" in my work: *The Internet and Society* builds on Thompson's attributes. This is not to claim that Brügger's own account lacks any importance or interest. However, his material components are only relevant to a theory of cultural transmission if he can begin to explain, as I attempt to do, how various technological characteristics of the internet affect the material basis of fixation, circulation and participation. It is only through these attributes, together with the other aspects of cultural transmission, that the way in which we communicate and the way our societies work is altered.

What is more problematic in Brügger's views is that his conceptualization of the "material components" of the internet opens up serious dangers of technological determinism. His account, for example, distinguishes between certain features that can "change throughout history, between cultures etc....", and others which should be seen as "invariant traits of the internet". It might make sense to recognize certain technological characteristics as being ideal typical of a particular technology at a given moment in time, but such traits are never wholly accidental to the social conditions in which they come about. If the internet "must have" these "invariant traits" then we must still allow for sufficient room for an analysis of why that should be the case. Evidence of technological determinism is often present in the work of those inspired by Innis, and we have to guard against taking such ideas on board. While I agree with Innis' general theme — that communication can be affected by the very form of the media — I am not at all satisfied by the conclusions Innis draws from what he calls the 'bias' of communication. These are highly questionable and Brügger makes no attempt to warn us about them.

### **WE ALL LIVE ON THE EDGE OF A TECHNOLOGICAL FRONTIER**

On the whole, I find Henrik Bødker's outline of the historical and social context of Howard Rheingold's work praiseworthy. Rheingold's book: *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier* is a seminal piece of work, highlighting the importance of new forms of human association and the tensions we face in our lives today. However, having said that, I remain unpersuaded by Bødker's argument that the "organism" metaphor furthers our understanding of new forms of human association supported by the internet. Replacing this metaphor for a more dynamic notion of "organic growth" or reducing it to the bare minimum of an "organic moment" does not suffice either. Bødker also mentions the "frontier" metaphor in Rheingold's work. I do not discuss this in my book. However, the idea of the "frontier", used in a rather romantic way to describe the search for community today, does not help us understand the dynamic of new forms of human association in late modernity. Let me take a critical look at

each of these metaphors together with Bødker's argument in their support.

Bødker's critique of my work rests on an attempt to connect the explanatory power of a biological analogy to a more phenomenological perspective. In my view, this attempt ignores much of the debate in contemporary social theory. So many questions beset such an approach. What about all the critique that has raged against employing biological parallels in the study of social systems and structure? Moreover, exactly what kind of phenomenological perspective does Bødker have in mind? What about the criticisms, which have been raised against these? Just how might we go about combining such a puzzling array of schools of thought? Do the difficulties associated with the perspectives employing biological metaphors and the phenomenological perspectives simply vanish in combining the two? I do not think so. My work is informed by a very different perspective. As Mark Poster is correct to point out, *The Internet and Society* develops a coherent overview of how the internet relates to society from the perspective of structuration theory.<sup>18</sup> Structuration theory dispenses with biological analogies precisely because they do not allow us to appreciate the rich experiences with virtual communities, which Rheingold attempts to describe. Structuration theory also dispenses with phenomenological approaches that merely deal with social systems and structures as backdrops against which meaningful action and interaction occurs. Biological analogies have no explanatory force and phenomenological perspectives have little to offer when it comes to developing an understanding of virtual communities. For example, they do not help us to address what it is about our late modern condition that motivates so many millions of individuals and organizations to participate in forming new forms of social relationship via the internet. In order to do this, we do not want biological metaphors or phenomenological perspectives, but an analysis of the conditions of late modernity as both the medium and outcome of practices of knowledgeable people.

Bødker relates Rheingold's use of the "frontier" metaphor to the significance of the frontier culture in American history. Like the frontier communities

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18. Mark Poster, in: *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4, 2, 2001.

of this bygone age, Bødker argues "so is the (electronic) frontier community caught between the potentials and benefits of the 'virtual' and the demands of localized sociality... between the open (and moving) spaces of the virtual frontier and the more sedimented and long-lasting structures of more committed bonds". It is not difficult to see why Bødker and Rheingold draw this parallel. At first glance, the early forms of virtual community may seem to resemble the kind of frontier communities of the past. I would argue, however, that the development of the internet and other forms of new media, have created new forms of interaction which have altered our information environments so profoundly that any comparison between traditional frontier communities and our modern virtual communities today is superficial at best.

The combination of the weak analysis of the conditions of late modernity afforded by the "organism" metaphor and the "frontier" metaphor creates further problems for an understanding of the internet and of our changing information environments today. It is not just people like Rheingold, not just the 'Whole World Crowd' or Bødker's 'rockers', who live at the outer edge of modern technology. We all do. We all live on the edge of a technological frontier that is creating possibilities which no one wholly understands. There is no moving back and I think it is rather arrogant and mistaken for anyone to suggest that when the project gets too big for their liking, they can simply move on.

### **THE INTERNET IS NOT ACCIDENTAL TO THE CONDITIONS OF LATE MODERNITY**

Any debate about the development of the internet and its impact on the cultural transformations taking place in society today must engage with the protracted debate about modernity versus postmodernity. Niels Ole Finnemann does not shun such an engagement and I agree with many of the points he raises in this respect. I am also deeply impressed by his comments about interfaces and the attention he draws to the importance of the relationship between the internet and other media. Let me now deal with some of the points of criticism he accentuates.

I have always been honest and open about my dislike of studies of the in-

ternet that choose to adopt a postmodern perspective. *The Internet and Society* engages from beginning to end with the modernity versus postmodernity debate. It constitutes an analysis of the internet, which differs radically from the kind of analysis Sherry Turkle attempts in her *Life on the Screen*. For her, the internet is a postmodern medium. For me, the rise of the internet is not accidental to the development of conditions, which typify late modernity. In extending John Thompson's theory of cultural transmission to the internet, I clearly express a different approach to that of Turkle. Moreover, having praised me for this in his introduction, Finnemann, like Brügger, is careless to suggest that I do not care about the technical medium of transmission. *The Internet and Society* does not ignore the specificities of the technical medium and it does not claim that these automatically result in new forms of action and interaction. I agree with Finnemann that, in a broad sense, 'virtuality' is nothing new. But then neither is 'digital representation'. What matters if we want to understand the social impact of the internet, is that we attend to the analysis of three aspects of cultural transmission: (1) the technical medium of transmission, (2) the institutional apparatus of transmission, and (3) the time-space distancing involved in transmission. Action and interaction using the internet involves each of these aspects in various ways. I attend to all three and I do not consider that I have been 'half-hearted' in pursuing the implications of Thompson's framework. It allows me to say far more interesting things about the internet and new forms of human association in late modernity than Finnemann chooses to report.

I agree fully with Finnemann's later comments that the internet must be understood in relationship with other media. This, again, is by no means missing from my work. However, I do not find Finnemann's list of five possible relationships between the internet and other media very convincing. This is because he tends to stress the attributes and the relationship between these technologies on only one level: the mechanical and technical. In my work, I look at the relationship between the internet and other media on *two* related levels. First, I argue that just because the internet can be seen as a 'new medium', this does not mean that we may begin our understanding of the internet from a fresh start. We must approach this phenomenon critically, using existing theories and

knowledge of other media. *The Internet and Society* demonstrates how our theories and knowledge of other media impact on our understanding of the internet. This aspect of understanding the relationship between the internet and other media is completely missing from Finnemann's account. Second, my analysis of the relationship between the internet and other media does not involve placing the technologies in a matrix and checking them for various technical differences and similarities. My analysis of the relationship between the internet and other media draws critically on Thompson's theory of cultural transmission. The internet and conventional media do not simply snap together technically or functionally in the way Finnemann suggests. The nature of their relationship depends on complex matters to do with the storage and circulation of information, the degree of participation required from users, the socially structured contexts in which information is produced and received, and the degree of time-space distancing involved. Finnemann's list cannot help us understand why some media are simulated while others are absorbed. The reason that newspaper websites do not replace paper editions of those newspapers is not simply a technical or mechanical issue. Finnemann's list also does not help us understand how the internet and other media are in a continuous cycle of renewal and decay, a process often resulting in altogether new kinds of media and unintended uses of existing ones.

Finnemann's question: "whether it is possible to analyze the internet without caring too much about the basic fact, that the internet is constituted by a set of computers...?" is rather an empty one. As is the question whether it is possible to analyze the internet without caring too much about the basic fact that the internet is constituted by its content, by the structured contexts in which it is used, and by the time space distancing which it allows. We obviously need to care about all of these matters and *The Internet and Society* does.

## **THE INTERNET IS AT THE HEART OF THE NEW DILEMMAS IN DEMOCRACY**

Internet use is refashioning community, organizations, and self-identity, and in so doing it is also challenging traditional conceptions of democracy, public life

and our involvement in them. Jakob Linnaa Jensen is right to emphasize the importance of this area of study. However, I do not agree with Jensen that my analysis allows me to take "...for granted the positive effects of the internet...". Moreover, his outline of my work hides some of the important distinctions and considerations I make. My main objective in the chapter Jensen refers to is to focus on the kind of publicness created by the internet and to examine the opportunities for, and the limitations on, the renewal of public life.

In *The Internet and Society*, I give many examples of internet use and successful political engagement, but nowhere do I suggest that the outcome of these efforts materializes automatically. I consistently argue that the development and the impact of the internet must be understood as a contextualized social phenomenon. The use of the internet for political engagement often involves struggles for visibility, conflict, and even network violence. I do not agree with Jensen that the internet is "anarchic" or that it necessarily results in a tendency towards social "fragmentation". If we want to talk about the "effects" of the internet at all in this way, then we should sensitize ourselves to the dual potentiality of communication technologies. In other words, we need to take into account the capability of any communication technology to produce one set of effects... or their opposite. Electronic communication is indeed changing the way we communicate and the way in which our societies work, but tendencies towards fragmentation must also be related dialectically to profound tendencies towards social integration. Consequently, the internet use does not necessarily preclude political engagement on various levels: local, regional, national and global. It also creates new opportunities for it.

Reading Jensen's contribution, I feel that he needs to draw a sharper distinction between dialogical models and deliberative models when he approaches the matter of conceptualizing publicness and the internet. Theory cannot be separated from practice in this respect, so I am not sure which "trap" Jensen claims I have fallen into! We must ask the question: What would Jensen's "wider societal dialogue" using the internet amount to? In *The Internet and Society*, I argue that those hoping that the internet will facilitate a dialogically mediated publicness will forever be disappointed. I indeed make no suggestions as to how

such an impractical objective can be achieved. Any suggestion that we can use a dialogical model of participatory opinion formation to understand the way in which internet use is refashioning the public sphere is wholly misleading. I avoid any comparison of the communication taking place on the internet with a 'conversation writ large'. The internet is facilitating a space of the visible that can best be characterized as a deliberative mediated publicness rather than a dialogical one. The idea of a deliberative conception of mediated publicness focuses attention on the processes by which individuals can come together in non-localized space and acquire information, encounter opinions of others that differ from their own and form reasoned judgments. Our understanding of the internet is not helped by the conceptions of publicness inspired by the assemblies of the classical Greek city-states or by late seventeenth and early eighteenth century salons and coffee-houses in Paris and London. These certainly do not constitute my theoretical point of departure as Jensen's contribution suggests.

Jensen's comments also seem to ignore that political debate has much to gain from advances in the discursive spaces involving a whole range of interactive situations. These may be online or offline. Sometimes, the internet is only involved in the coordination of political debate. Discursive spaces may also involve linking the internet into other media, such as radio, television or newspapers. The internet may well still be a marginal forum for political debate, as Jensen argues, but non-participation in online forums, and other arrangements, does not mean that we are not affected by opinions which are in part shaped there. In any case, while there are many possibilities for using the internet for upgrading the level of public debate and democratizing our societies, what really matters is whether we can make a difference and intervene in our world the best we can. We do not simply join internet forums and debates just because they are there.

I am delighted that *The Internet and Society* raises more questions than it answers. This is to be expected from such a wide-ranging introduction to the internet and its significance in modern society. We all have our ideas and hopes with respect to this communication technology. I have made an attempt to set



out the beginnings of a social theory of the internet, linking it to central debates concerning community, organizational renewal, self-identity, publicness, globalization and regulation. I am very grateful to Niels Brügger, Henrik Bødker, Niels Ole Finnemann and Jakob Linnaa Jensen for the critique they have given my work here, and I am spurred on by the insight they have given me that many of my ideas about the internet and modern culture have not yet been elucidated in the detail they demand.

### **The Centre for Internet Research**

The Centre for Internet Research was established in September 2000 with the aim of encouraging research in the social and cultural implications and functions of the internet. More information about the centre and its activities can be obtained from <http://cfi.imv.au.dk>.

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