

*The public sphere and communication flows in the era of the Net**

Giorgio Grossi (University of Milano-Bicocca)

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Dahlgren, P. (2005), *The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation*, «Political Communication», 22 (2), pp. 147-162.

As Dahlgren (2005) has rightly observed, the overwhelming, pervasive development of Internet has favoured reflections about the impact of the new media on the public sphere, and the possibility of it revitalizing democracy and therefore political participation in the societies of the second modernity¹. At the same time, for over a decade now many authors have been highlighting the problem of the “crisis of democracy” – degeneration, involution, shoddiness and so on – and attempting to identify the causes in the enormous socio-economic and political transformations of the last twenty years. The two observations have much in common: democracy, the public sphere and communication flows seem to be forming one of the main bases of contemporary societies. In the sense that a decisive key for interpreting the so-called “reflexive modernity” (Beck 2000) seems to be sited right in this **triangle: languages, public discourses and political communication** are fundamental to collective practices, and such

(*) English translation from: Mosca L. e Vaccari C. (a cura di), *Nuovi media, nuova politica? Partecipazione e mobilitazione online*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2011.

¹ In the vocabulary of late twentieth-century social sciences numerous labels followed one another in describing the transformation of western societies: post-industrial, post-modern, second modernity, information, liquid, etc. In this chapter some of these definitions are used indifferently as signs of a process of change which in any case has not yet taken us out of modernity itself.

practices have a participative and therefore democratic value if they appear within one or more public spheres.

The aim of this paper is to link up the destiny of democracy with the structure and workings of the public sphere in the historical period of the Net, starting from the fact that though modernisation and democratisation are not necessarily synonymous, as is well known, their most important structural feature is their mutual interdependence. Consequently, in order to analyze the importance of this interdependent triangle, it is necessary to start from **two assumptions**. The first takes it for granted that the context in which these three processes of democracy, public spheres and communicative flows operate has undergone a by now * systemic socio-economic and politico-cultural change, and therefore is to be analyzed in its concrete reality and consequences, both desired and undesired. The second assumption holds that the concepts referring to * the three processes (the emancipative dimension of democracy, the discursive nature of the public sphere and the participative value of linguistic-communicative practices) must be problematised and partly reformulated.

This proposal to *frame* our area of analysis may well run into uncertainties and contradictions, but it serves in the first place to exclude from our universe of references all those analytical positions and points of view which *minimize* the relation between the public sphere and democracy and doubt the existence of the former or reduce it to a simple normative model far from social reality. Likewise for those positions which only *emphasize* euphorically or dysphorically the public sphere/Internet connection, without sufficient investigation of the systemic elements and relations that the two together bring up with any reference to democracy.

Indeed, it is undeniable that the transformations of the public sphere in late modernity societies are increasingly interlinked with the growing pervasiveness of the Net – both in the flows of top-down political communication and bottom-up discursive practices which also make public alternative issues, multiple belongings and new rights. However, the rules, regulations, statutes and actual workings of the public sphere often appear obscure, allusive and poorly

analysed in their concrete aspects, though they are particularly communicative and therefore participative and potentially democratic².

At the same time, next to a limited re-conceptualisation of communicative agency as the main stay of the public sphere, there is often no convincing analysis of the transformations of political agency in all its forms, whether institutionalised or otherwise.

The main question I will therefore try to answer in this paper can be formulated as follows: in what way can the development of the Net and the new media favour the emergence of new forms of *publicness* that can relaunch the public sphere and therefore democratic society beyond the paradigm of the “audience democracy” dominant today, and that can promote and enliven communicative practices able to articulate a different mediatisation of the public sphere itself?

In other words, the task is to set in motion more precise, analytical reflections on the themes associated with the **triangle democracy/public sphere/communicative** flows and attempt to analyse *in primis* the main contextual transformations – transnational individualised societies, the mediatisation and increasing dis-intermediation of the public sphere, the transformation of politics - to then go on and tackle the problematic issues that derive from them. The final aim is to contribute above all to the construction of a “reflexive” theory of the public sphere in the era of the Net, i.e. in the historical phase of those societies of radical modernity which present increasingly distinctive and specific features in comparison to the social organisations preceding them in the western world – and lead to a conclusion hypothesizing a **“democracy of individualised citizens”**.

Three changes in context

² As is well known, according to Habermas communication or communicative agency is a constituent not only of the public sphere but also society itself because it is the foundation of the vital worlds. Consequently such agency embodies the emancipative fabric of society for two reasons: it opposes the “instrumental agency” typical of systems and therefore configures as “dominion-free communication”; furthermore as a communication oriented towards agreement, understanding and reciprocal recognition as the relational instrument constituent of the vital worlds, it favours integration via solidarity (see Privitera 2001). On the other hand though Dahlgren himself partly criticises Habermas’ deliberative model, he has to recognise that in the democratic practices that lie at the basis of “civic cultures”, «The discussion here may and may not always take the form of a Habermas-style deliberation, but what is more important is that the dynamics of reciprocity which it can generate, reinforcing the parameters of civic culture and the impact that the latter can have on the more general political situation » (2005: 159).

The “audience democracy”, or from mass to individualised transnational societies

Manin’s well-known typology of democracy (2010) assigns to the present phase – the twenty or so years following the fall of the Berlin Wall – the structure of a democratic society, which he terms “audience democracy”. It is also found indirectly but pertinently in many analyses of the transformations of post-industrial societies (Touraine 1970; Giddens 1994; Beck 2000). Recently some scholars of the new media have highlighted it as a typical process of social shaping produced and favoured by the increasing pervasiveness of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) (Lievrouw, Livingstone 2007). Among other peculiarities, these societies feature *communicative relations* as pre-eminent in modelling and structuring political and social relations with a pervasiveness unknown to past societies. They are societies, therefore, strengthened not only by face-to-face interaction, but by mediated relations, unbound by time and space, which concern both people and their relations with institutions, organisations, places, goods and objects.

We find here at work an ambivalent and apparently contradictory process. On one hand it asserts “the society of the individuals” with its favouring the well-known processes of individualisation (Beck 2000) and tendencies to cultural and political de-massification; the joint result of the crises in the mass parties and their function of political/cultural representation as well as the decline of concerted policies for services and social negotiations (welfare state and trade unions). On the other hand an “audience society” is constituted implicitly or explicitly, which establishes with the leadership and political power a direct, personal relationship, “in-mediated”, but at the same time neo-plebiscitary and “spectatorial”, in a social context in which political relationships are mostly filtered by the media system and flows of political communication. In both tendencies a decisive influence can be attributed to the role of the new media and ICT in that they are capable of contributing to the construction of a new social environment³ which can favour the personalisation of choices and walks of life (even if partialy)

³ Lievrouw and Livingstone note: « The enormous quantity of literature on the new media shows that the relatively orderly terrain of mass societies has been transformed into a new emerging context with net forms, roles, relations and

and the loosening of unsatisfactory cooperative and solidaristic ties. At the same time, however, they can promote a possible social and community re-aggregation on less obvious and institutionalized bases. These new contemporary social structures can no longer be defined “mass” but need to go under the name of “transnational individualised societies”⁴.

This new relational organisation leads at the same time to a rethinking of representation systems and the forms of links of social belonging, as well as the dynamics of political activism and civic engagement. With its deliberately oxymoronic turn of phrase, the well-known prophetic metaphor of the “global village” can yet again well interpret this phase of changing context. There is under way a process of *disembedding* from traditional spatial, temporal and social links⁵, increasingly reaching beyond the territorial borders of the nation-state (Giddens 1994; Fraser 2006) – to which the new media contribute actively by creating the conditions of communicative and therefore cultural interaction, which is highly personalised and even fragmented, even if at the same time it is “globalised” and capable of “anti-globalisation orientations”. Next to this we witness the construction of a “political spectacle” of democracy within which audiences, targets, fandom, “tribes” and “friends” are formed. They often recognize one another as irresolute users of a collective participatory process, in which “infotainment” goes on mixing and contaminating the languages of politics and show-business (Mazzoleni, Sfardini 2009).

In this new social set up the public sphere (or spheres, according to the level of abstraction chosen⁶) finds itself operating in a highly differentiated and more complicated context. Spatially the need is to move always further along the *local-global axis*⁷, articulating and adapting the

dynamics [...] what make the new media new '... are the different ways in which the technologies develop, or their *modelling* and social *consequences* » (2007: XVI).

⁴ The term “transnational” defines more realistically the intermediate dimension between nation-states and global society, and seems to describe more accurately the present state of development of contemporary societies.

⁵ On the importance of the spatial-temporal distancing as brought by the media coverage of culture, see also Thompson (1998).

⁶ There are different positions on whether public spheres are pluralized or not (see for example Keane 2000 who is pro and Sparks 2001 who is against). Furthermore in his revisitation of the concept of public sphere Habermas himself (1996) makes a clear difference between three levels of publicness : a) the ephemeral public sphere (bars, streets); the public sphere physically staged (family evenings, party meetings, etc); the abstract public sphere (made up of readers and listeners scattered worldwide, that can only be reunited via the mass media.)

⁷ On the importance of space and the distinction between space and place in the processes of disembedding and globalization see Giddens (1994). On the local-global link and the processes of globalization see Robertson (1992), Perulli (1993), Spybey (1998).

dynamics of *publicness*, i.e. the forms of making public and their level of generalisation according to area chosen per agency type. As for communicative dynamics, the need is to tackle the mediatization/intermediation axis⁸ as regards communicative practices and discursive formats because the new digital technologies mediatize almost all social relations and at the same time reduce the processes of intermediation (typical of mass societies) in the name of a “direct and personalised” democracy.

As will be clarified later on, the public sphere is much aware of this double axial dimension present in transnational individualized societies. On one hand because the dialectics between local and global and their overlapping can increase or reduce their impact on political power (de-localized and trans-nationalized in turn). Though it does indeed extend its range of action enormously by favouring unlimited public discursive forms sustained and activated by portions of “tendentially global” civil society and in any case culturally trans-nationalized. On the other hand, because the correlation between the increase in communicative media coverage (favoured by ICT) and the reduction in filters and intermediary dispositions open the road to greater or lesser publicness, according to the grade of relevance of the discursive practices and the construction of influential public opinion.

In fact, while the phase of “audience democracy” seems to respond according to a certain point of view to a greater direct citizen involvement – no filter of the mass parties, bureaucratic machinery, institutional structures on the territory (all the more so if passed off as “direct”), it often re-enforces on neo-populist bases a one-to-many dependency relation between leader and individualised citizens. And that reproduces the “allocutory”⁹ rather than the “deliberative” and

⁸ More precisely: a) for *mediatization* as will be explained further on is meant the particular process of social mediation which regards the introduction of communication technologies (paper, radio waves, vinyl, analogical signals, digital support, etc) in social interaction and the cultural reproduction among individuals, groups and institutions; b) for intermediation is meant not as much the presence of canals/apparatus of interposition between actors and social reality (that can never be missing, as shown in the case of language or symbolic interaction) but rather that set of devices, formats, professionalisms and dedicated areas (therefore not only instruments but also relational forms, discursive dynamics and norms) which regulate the circulation of information, opinions, interests and values which allow actors and institutions to guide communicative practices – both consensual and contractual, conflictual and competitive – to modify reality itself and its cognitive statutes (*intermediation* as the infra-structural dimension of complex societies and as the articulation of the democratic procedures both in civil society and the state).

⁹ According to Bordewijk, Van Kaam’s famous “informative traffic” model (1982) the *allocutory* model – typical of the old media – concerns the one-way, non interactive communicative flow between centre and periphery, in which the centre (broadcaster) decides on the contents, times and access models to the contents, which the periphery (receivers) can only accept.

“interactive” model of communicative relations, the latter made possible and promoted by the World Wide Web. Furthermore, it contributes to emptying the role of the public sphere itself – from the space for discussion and formation of public opinion to a mere area of projective and symbolic identification typical of a “society of the spectacle”. So it ends by minimizing the potentialities offered by the Net understood as an infrastructure capable of developing communicative dynamics on *new relational bases* and therefore on possible practices of activism and civic commitment.

This diverse structure of both society and democracy is therefore the first contextual feature for analysing the transformation of the public sphere. There are changes, indeed, in the socio-cultural picture, the mediations of the political relation between government and electors, the available and practicable communicative models, so creating new but also problematic conditions for a new structure of publicness within extended communities, which are somewhat different from those of the first modernity.

The mediatization of the public sphere between the social construction of publicness and tendencies to dis-intermediation.

If the change in context concerning more generally the structure of the second modernity societies seems in a certain way to be ascertained and shared by many scholars and analysts, the discourse historico-social transformations of the public sphere is more complicated. The theory of the public sphere in fact – going back to the proto-Habermas paradigm¹⁰ - has often suffered from criticisms about its norms which have never developed an adequate empirical analysis of the diverse historico-social realisations of publicness. We therefore need to move briefly back in time before discussing the present transformation of the public sphere in today’s societies. Let us now examine some of the issues and the discussions deriving from them.

Audience democracy and associated individualisation processes that today invest the workings of the public sphere, especially the pervasiveness of the Internet and the development

¹⁰ Habermas has given different versions of his theory of the public sphere, but in the international scientific debate - marked by the late English translation brought out thirty years after his first work – reference is only made to his first 1962 version.

of Web 2.0 (from *You Tube* to the social networks) are, as is well-known, the precipitate of a longer and more complicated historical process which goes through the whole of modernity and has produced, in chronological order, first the mediatisation of culture (Thompson 1998), then the of the public sphere and public opinion (Grossi 2006, 2010), and lastly the mediatisation of politics (Bennett, Entman 2001). Such a course, as is foreseeable, goes back to long term processes but can be summed up here in three main stages: a) the invention of the printing press at the end of the XV century leading to autonomous cultural production and circulation as the basis of craft, commerce and technology and consequently the unlimited reproduction of cultural products; b) the coming of a state public sphere in the nascent mass societies of the second half of the nineteenth century featuring the increasing inclusion of the citizenry through the increase in free time and filtered through an always more appealing and pervasive media arena; c) the progressive transformation of the political field in the second half of the twentieth century with the crisis of the mass parties, the development of “democratic“ leaderism and the affirmation of media neo-populism. All processes of mediatisation of social relations which have in common however the same distinct matrix: the determining contribution of communicative technology and the increasing relevance of cognitive and symbolic flows in modifying and reorganizing relations and social interactions referring to different contexts and sectors of collective life.

In such a brief and inevitably simplified summary of an extensive and articulated historical process, we can be said to have passed – in the processes of reproduction and social change in culture, the public sphere and politics – from a system of face-to-face collective relations situated in time and space to forms of social interaction more and more mediated by communicative technology, strongly de-spacialised and de-temporalized. From here the use of the concept of mediatisation as the common thread which links within modernity the evolutive processes of the contexts here under discussion

Leaving here discussions over the more general impact of these transformations on culture and putting off until later an analysis of political transformations, it is now the case to deal specifically with the organisation of the public sphere.

The present more socially-founded reading of the transformations of the public sphere – moreover already present in the original formulation of *Oeffentlichkeit*¹¹ and further extended by Habermas himself - must nevertheless protect itself from a structural-functional or reductionist interpretation because it must not be forgotten that the public sphere itself, like all other social structures including democracy is never the product of one process alone, the privileged connection with a unique determining factor. On the contrary, it is always the result and the historico-social precipitate of a set of interactions and interdependences which on the basis of the forces in the field – parties, movements, associations, institutions, governments, economic machinery, social groups – determines from time to time the grade of publicizing (the opening and discursiveness of the publicness and incisiveness (level of efficacious influence on political decisions) of the public sphere in relation to collective dynamics and therefore the level of democratisation present in any society. In other terms the structure of the public sphere, its capacity to influence the government, its participative dimension which is never univocal or to be taken for granted, can go through different phases and reflect a different combination of its constituent elements in relation to historico-social contexts.

In this sense, however, the same phenomenon of mediatisation of the public sphere – with top-down or bottom-up emphasis according to the interests and forces in the field, the historical phases and the levels of democratisation – always leads to a concrete articulation – a certain structure of publicness - which is the consequence and precipitate of those concurrent or conflicting dynamics. In fact, even in the historical phase of the “audience democracy”, however weak or distorted it may seem to some, the articulation of the public never loses its social and collective aspect, because the social role it carries out in a democratic society can never be totally wiped away¹².

Therefore what is important is to recall here – as Tilly (2009) opportunely underscores when talking about democracy - we can find ourselves also for the public sphere faced by

¹¹ As is known, but not always fully taken into consideration, Habermas underscores right from the beginning the strategic role of the press (and the circulation of news) in the initial stages of the middleclass public sphere and the formation of an enlightened public opinion.

¹² According to Manin (2010), in fact, the “proof/trial/ of discussion is one of the four foundations of representative government. However much it can change in the different phases of the development of democracy (in the party democracy rather than in the audience democracy it can never be totally eliminated or hidden.

emancipative or regressive tendencies in the cognitive and symbolic dynamics lying at the basis of the workings of publicness itself in various countries. Indeed, while mediatisation is an acquired fact, the articulation of the communicative practices connected to it can be different. So if the spaces for discussion, participation from below, activation and construction of the public opinion are extended, we find ourselves in front of a phase of “making public” the public sphere itself, and therefore the democratisation of society, by means of communicative practices and substantive participations. At this point communicative mediatisation and associated technologies have a proactive, liberating, culturally innovating function. If, instead, the spaces for discussion are cut down or debate is purely rhetorical (though spreading in the Net) and citizen participation is discouraged in favour of the elite putting in an appearance, if opinions are trampled on and cultural conformity is favoured, then mediatisation leads to deprivation and slows processes down, causing the de-publicizing and de-democratisation of society itself.

The theme therefore of the role of the Net in relaunching or strengthening the mediated public sphere calls to be problematised within this more complex historical process, in which the form of mediatisation itself is the result of wider politico-social processes and is affected by the same waves of democratisation (or not) of society precisely because of the interdependence of the triangle democracy/public sphere/communication flows with the conflictual dynamics that lie at the basis of the social construction of institutional areas and the notion of public good in every society.

In this light, a second preliminary question needs to be in-depthed, which ties up with the first historical organisation of the public sphere in the societies of the first modernity and allows a discussion not of the normative model but the empirical configuration of its strategies for democracy. Indeed if the first configuration of publicness in industrial mass societies is interpreted too reductively as a mere involution, de-politicisation or manipulation in comparison to the original ideal typical model (Habermas 1974; Ginsberg 1986; Eder 2010), the risk is that the acquisitions and innovations provoked and favoured by the social change itself are undervalued.

The alternative reflection that I here intend to put forward is based on a quite different analytical assumption, an assumption that I have discussed amply elsewhere (Grossi 2010) and

will briefly summarize here. If we refer to the crucial phase of development of industrial societies and democratisation processes – from the 1850s to the early 1900s – featuring not only nation-building processes but also the spread of mass parties and social movements, we note the *specific conformation* of the public sphere takes on a different shape from that hypothesized by Habermas, at least in the first version. In the place of the dialogic face-to-face of the eighteenth-century coffee-houses and drawing rooms, by now incompatible with the nascent mass society based on the cultural market and the search for generalised consent, a new mediatized publicness was being built, a new virtual arena, by means of the media system and the cultural industry. In this phase, however, called for example “media capitalism” by Eder (2010) and “audience democracy” by Manin (2010) – in the mediatised public sphere the cognitive and discursive dynamics typical of this social context are activated mainly via socially accepted and shared forms and practices of intermediation, albeit under continual negotiation.

It was the case indeed right from then to introduce into the nascent media arena specific discursive formats, define specialized communicative roles and construct contexts deputated for debating which allowed the mediatised public sphere to function in line with a growing mass society based on the generalized inclusion of the citizens, as well as the request for participation coming from the popular classes and therefore inevitably rethought to start from a cognitive division of the work (communicative) between writers and readers, speakers and listeners. This first historical organisation therefore led to the introduction of *intermediation dispositions* – activated, negotiated, handled both from the top and the bottom, i.e. both by the institutions and the nascent mass movements (parties and trade unions). They concerned communicative infrastructures (the available media), the interlocutors’ roles (those who speak/read/listen), the discursive formats (commentaries, news, interviews and debates), the rules for discussions and the procedural norms for legitimate access to the arena. So the mediatised public sphere of this historical phase – still founded on the print industry and the radio – saw the government, political power, the journalists, the intellectuals¹³ but also the

¹³ Exemplary is the famous “Dreyfus Affair” (1894) denounced in the press by a writer/intellectual like Zola in the article “*J'accuse*”: « The Dreyfus Affair is not only an evident example of the mobilization of public opinion and an opinion campaign in the modern sense of the term.... but it is also a tangible example of what Tarde (1901) was theorising in that period: it is the press which ‘creates’ the public and public opinion, which nationalises and internationalises the ‘public

spokesmen of the mass parties increasingly involved in cognitive and symbolic intermediation in favour of the citizens: to capture their consent and vehicle their dissent, affirm the dominant values or claim new rights. In this sense the State has always 'colonised' the public sphere, but it has had to negotiate the management of the public arena with the counter-powers expressed from time to time by the civil society through parties and movements¹⁴.

Today, nevertheless, the evolutive phase of the social context in which the public sphere is inserted seems to feature an inverse tendency, in which processes of dis-intermediation seem to be imposing themselves, and causing the progressive disappearance of all the filters, clearing houses, designated sites, roles and professional deontologies which in the past had guaranteed the existence of a mediatized public sphere, but not for this devoid of publicness, i.e. accessibility, discursiveness and emancipative capacity. Even if all this happened via a new format of 'represented' making public (on the model of 'political representation') inserted in a media arena where the mainstream discursive practices were mainly the monopoly of *intermediaries*, with a proxy for "public communication".

These processes of dis-intermediation impose themselves – this is the basic hypothesis - with the transit of party to audience democracy, in which there prevails the construction of a direct political, and therefore communicative link between government/leadership and citizens, within individualisation processes which find confirmation in a culture of "personalisation" typical of a consumer goods market, in which the clients claim not so much influence over production but the right to shape the product to consume to their own pleasure.

Although this structural transit of publicness has already been conditioned by the old media (especially the television, which has favoured the so-called "media neo-populism"¹⁵), it is clear in this context the Net takes on a central, albeit ambivalent role. On one hand it increases the calls for dis-intermediation – which is promoted by the technology - lessening that "two-stage communication flow" recalling Lazarsfeld which was characteristic of the first phases of mass

spirit', which 'discovers' and brings out individual opinions, because in contemporary societies newspapers orientate and model » (Grossi 2004: 7-8).

¹⁴ See Negt, Kluge (1979), Fraser (1992, 2006), della Porta (2010).

¹⁵ On media populism see Mazzoleni (2003), Grossi (2009) Ortega (2009).

society and the old analogical media¹⁶. On the other hand it promotes a bottom-up re-politicisation (and therefore making public again) coming from the collective debate, opening previously unthinkable spaces for participation for less integrated and less aligned sectors, also on the margins of civil society. In this sense the new scenario of the digital technologies could re-propose on new bases the theme of a diverse real structure of the public sphere in contemporary societies, replacing the old intermediation dispositions in crisis today) with new platforms for debate, new modes of connecting with the public to reconstruct communication flows capable of re-intermediation. Capable, i.e. of organizing in a different way the levels of publicness and transnational discursive arenas in the light of a different idea of mediatisation which re-launches and re-qualifies participation, setting itself also the task of redefining areas, stages, communicative formats, rules for obtaining attention and decision-making¹⁷.

Dual politics, or from “new politics” to post-politics

As already mentioned, in the last twenty years social transformations have concerned not only the conformation and configuration of contemporary societies, also modifying the functioning of democracy and the public sphere, but they have also started questioning again the nature and functioning of politics in our daily lives. In particular, what is conceptualized as the “mediatisation of politics” – the particular organisation of democratic society in the presence of politics which are always more mediated by the flows of communication and the direct relationship between leader and elector-citizens – is a process which really develops in two distinct phases. From the seventies and eighties (Mendelsohn, Crespi 1970; Pasquino 1992) talk was beginning about the passage from old to new politics: the spectacularisation of politics especially in its public dimension, media logic as the new standard or reference of political

¹⁶ Lazarsfeld’s paradigm on the “limited effects” of the media on people presupposes the intermediation of opinion makers in the processes of social influence. The role of the old media in organizing the mediatised public sphere feels the effects of this orientation (though in a different light). The communicative relation between power and citizens is filtered through journalists, experts, intellectuals and “mediated public discourses” which re-elaborate top-down flows and bottom-up opinions.

¹⁷ As is known, Luhmann (1978) criticises Habermas’s paradigm on the function of public opinion in a society where public is governed by the media system writing that not necessarily what is being discussed (because it is put at the centre of the public attention) coincides with what is being decided (which can be removed from such visibility).

language, the personalisation of leadership and marginalisation of party apparatus, surveys and political consultants as the new resources for electoral competition, the decline of militancy and political subcultures¹⁸. Nevertheless, this new modality of political agency (much in vogue both positively and negatively the expression “the Americanisation of politics”) continued to hold good some prerogatives of the “old politics”. And these were the representative institutions and the mainstream public arena as the principles references of programmed political confrontation, the leadership and political class as the main actors in political life, the citizen-electors as “the audience of mediatized politics” within the institutionalized system. Analyses of the period – especially political and media studies – examined the transformations under way and offered readings which were more critical and worried than optimistic. But they did not seem to gather the still fragmentary clues, which would lead to questioning the nature itself of political agency, the concept of politics in late modernity societies. On the contrary, they underlined the increasing disaffection of electors towards political power and the institutions, which the parties and governments tried to combat via an increase in communicative media flows and the introduction of “standing campaigns” (Blumenthal 1980). They also underscored individual closure and citizens taking refuge in the private (Lasch 1981; Sennett 1982) and stigmatised the decline of civic engagement and the crisis in associative participation (Putnam 2004).

New politics appears in fact always more like a perverse process in which the political system was trying to retrieve the bases of legitimation undermined by the crisis of the mass parties, the decline of the welfare state and the growing deficit of representation. Meanwhile, though, it was promoting a distorted mediatization of the public debate by means of a “symbolic” use of politics (Edelman 1987), that the processes of neo-Napoleonic leaderisation, politics as a spectacle and the incipient media populism tend to favour and implement.

In the course of the same period, however, other scholars less specialised in the political field and more attentive to an overall analysis of the social change under way (the analysis of Giddens’ “consequences of modernity” which include the multiplication of social movements,

¹⁸ For the periodisation and nature of these transformations see in particular the summary in Norris (1997). On the origins of the “spectacular –politics” see Marletti (1987).

the transformations of the new capitalist culture, the emergence of new loyalties and collective identities) highlight a second process of social change which concerned the entire field of action of politics. This included a new definition of politics and political action, outside the traditional context of the democratic institutions, rethinking it both in the light of the typical social processes of societies which are no longer mass, but more and more individualized both with reference to a new way of understanding commitment and political self-promotion. This second phase can well be termed post-political. While, in fact the main current of *new politics* continued to denounce the damage caused by the intertwining of the media and politics and the consequent disaffection /disengagement of the citizens (reduced to being mere spectators and consumers of the “political spectacle”), if these scholars are read in parallel and reinterpreted in this light, they seemed to suggest the emergence of a double dynamic of the political field. Side by side with traditional politics, contemporary societies activate other dimensions of political action which stand out and /or oppose institutional ones, giving birth to new modalities and forms of political action defined variously as “sub-politics” (Beck 2000), “life-politics” (Giddens 1994) and “lifestyle-politics” (Bennett 1998). This has led to an identification of the cohabitation of distinct political practices within society (institutional and extra-institutional) and different concepts of political agency (collective and individual) always in conflict with one another. This kind of cohabitation has thus favoured the emergence of a kind of “dual politics” in society, in which the statutes of citizenship, civil commitment, political participation take on more and more different meanings according to the context they refer to¹⁹.

Consequently, the crisis of traditional political communication taken for granted in the present phase of western democracies (Blumler, Gurevitch 2000; Bennet, Entman 2001; Dahlgren 2005) is not only the product of the dissolution of the institutional political system (in Italy we would say at the end of the First Republic) but it is also and especially the consequence of the crisis of politics as a form of collective agency. In fact, in bypassing the mediation of the mass parties and marrying the primate of the leader/president going public (Roncarolo 1994), audience democracy ends by modifying the very idea of political relations and experience,

¹⁹ In this context post-politics does not mark the end or overcoming of politics, but it is a different way of thinking/doing politics within individualised societies in which political action can take on somewhat articulated and also unexpected forms.

programmed universalism and collective interest, generating both alienation and de-politicisation and even unwittingly promoting new ways of understanding civic commitment and political practices. It is on this terrain in fact that movements, associations and territorial groups affirm a different idea of politics and civic engagement, understood especially as an extra-institutional and de-bureaucratized practice which often finds in the Network's interactive and linguistic strong points an alternative to the politics of consumption managed by the old media in the neo-populist model of the "audience society".

Let us now recall very briefly the features of this post political phenomenon,.

- a) Individualisation (Beck 2000), self-realisation (Giddens 1994), re-identification (Bennett 1998) lie at the centre of this different concept of politics which is based on the crisis of traditional "citizenry cultures". In fact, side by side with emancipation politics (equality and social justice) there develops and takes force a life politics based on self-realisation, personal ethics and risk minimisation. This produces inevitably a widening of the confines of politics outside the political system, creating a different political culture (and new groups and movements) based on life style and existential privatism which nevertheless politicize such agency against the institutional political system. This in its turn is more and more incapable of responding to the needs of an individualized and globalized society, which the system itself has helped to promote. In this light, the arrival of post-politics is not necessarily a regressive sign indicating an abandonment of politics (even if at times it can appear egoistic and particularistic). On the contrary, it refers to the re-formulation of a concept of politics both as a collective re-identification on different bases to the historical ones, both as individual, personal self-realisation as a result of the processes of reflexive self-realisation which have led contemporary societies to enter right into "radical modernity".
- b) This process of "privatizing politics", as it has polemically been called, is however also the consequence of the political system (government, institutions and parties) progressively losing its functions when faced by the promotion and regulation of social change. In fact, the capacity to organize this change has passed increasingly over to subsystems which have become the depositaries of sub-politics: science, economics, technology (Beck 2000). These areas have two distinct features: they have a great capacity to influence the worlds-of-life, mixing promises and

fears, success and risk, utopias and ethical doubts, are widely self-referential and self-creating and are not subject to the control mechanisms of delegating and accountability. Thus the sub-political is turned directly into the political through people's lives, and the representative and governing institutions are increasingly forced to negotiate a development they have not planned nor can control completely. To this process, clearly ambivalent because it is not devoid of fragmentation and corporativism, is added another process of the same kind, albeit still more paradoxical: it is the growth of democratisation which can lead to a progressive block of the political system itself. In fact the increasing claim for, and extension of, civil rights in all social areas (especially those closer to individualisation and the evaluation of subjectivities), giving origin to a multiplicity of the forms of political culture end by undermining the political system itself, which can no longer wholly govern such a social ferment and excess of requests for generalized empowerment. And therefore political expectations are generated and lived which are always less compatible with institutional answers. Post-politics therefore must not be understood reductively as a regression and involution because it is the consequence, perhaps unexpected, of a process of social change not extraneous either to modernisation or democratisation and because it highlights the increasing divorce between the logic of the systems and the needs of the vital worlds.

- c) Politics, or rather the field of political agency thus appears divided into three distinct levels, which manage to cohabit and conflict at the same time. Institutional politics cover the government, elections, political class, representative institutions. Sub-politics include the driving subsystems of modernisation which replace with new means the management of social change and therefore the impact on people's lives. Life politics (or biopolitics) are characterized by new dynamics of social commitment as well as the forms of unconventional engagement (Bennett 1998). Nevertheless, they refer to the statutes of political involvement, perhaps more neutral or with less immediate solidarity – which are outside if not against the mainstream of political agency. This produces more and more post-politics, in the sense that it modifies the traditional interpretative categories and forces new analyses and new working hypotheses to be put in the field.

This last tendency is therefore relevant and decisive for a correct definition of the grounds of our discussion. If the existence of different forms of political agency in our present societies are not even postulated, and social practices are evaluated according to interpretative categories which refer to one and one alone interpretation of political agency, the risk exists of misunderstanding not only the problems but also possible solutions. In fact, the processes of dis-intermediation quoted above could also seem the consequence of this political transformation, opening the road to possible phenomena of re-intermediation on new bases²⁰.

²⁰ Indeed, the poor functioning (inefficiency) of the intermediations dispositions could also depend on the fact that they no longer intercept the requests for political renewal emerging from some sectors in the society. Hence the possible appearance of new forms od re-intermediation – whose models cannot yet be forecast– capable of considering these different request from extra-institutional politics.

The “cyber-transformation” of the public sphere

The present phase – with its contextual changes and constantly evolving ICT going towards an increasing “ubiquity”, “interactivity” and “re-arrangement” of the communicative flows which influence the collective relational system (Lievrouw, Livingstone 2007) – seems to be leading towards an authentic cyber-transformation of the public sphere, as Dahlgren (2005) defines it in one of his most accomplished essays on the subject in hand. It is a different configuration of the social space within which are sited both the communicative practices promoted by institutional machinery and alimeted by civic cultures operating in civil societies. A transformation of the publicness which seems to influence deeply the nature and structure of the public sphere of the Net and which posts therefore diverse questions for research which up to now have had only in part convincing answers.

In fact, there exist excessive and simplistic contrasts in the analyses of the collective debate and scientific literature on the relation between the public sphere and the network plus relative processes of mediatisation which have been built up in the last decade. Beyond the obvious differences in empirical researches on the role and direction of the on-line practices, the contrasts finish by interacting negatively with the construction of possible new interpretative hypotheses to analyse the transformations under way. In particular, we can recall at least two.

A first position underscores a contrast within the public sphere in the way the Net is used by different categories of actors. On one side the new protagonism of social movements is underscored, how they have favoured the empowering of the public sphere bottom upwards using Internet according to agency strategies and repertoires all directed towards backing the empowerment of new social groups/ subjects and promoting political and cultural innovation within civil society and basic associations. On the other hand light is thrown negatively on the somewhat shortsighted instrumental pragmatism of traditional parties and political institutions orientated in the other direction to use prevalently the Net and show-window sites as loudspeakers, reproducers, spreaders of ready-packed communicative flows aimed at keeping the internal hierarchies, reproducing consensus, the political and cultural conservation of mainstream politics, whether in power or opposition. This position is held by many of those

analyses which exalt or overestimate the role of Internet as a tool re-launching participation in the public sphere and therefore as a lever for the democratisation of society (“The Network does the public sphere good”) . In the same position are those approaches which re-affirm the capacity of the political institutions and economic power to adapt to the new virtual being of the digital arena via the increasing and pervasive commercialisation of Internet and with the creation of portals and research engines with a high but selective capacity for information (“The Network harms the public sphere”) . This vision is very schematic, made of wishful thinking and libertarian ideology, with a scarce capacity for picking up the many ambivalences and contradictions present in the present phase of transformation of the public sphere.

A second position is already different, starting with its treatment of the role and function of the public sphere in the era of the Net. Here we find those who play down the impact of Internet on the configuration of the public sphere: on-line is often seen as a simple copy or fuller version of off-line. It is pointed out that citizen participation reveals no increase at all, and that in any case it does not seem to influence the main public agenda. Furthermore, many more of the *e-government* and *e-democracy* processes seem in reality to be firmly piloted by the traditional political system. Other voices highlight the innovatory aspect of the Net, both because new subjects access the mediatized public area and new languages and transversal horizontal interactive relations said to be carriers of a new bottom-up democracy outside the mediation ties imposed by the institutions (Barber 1984). Here too the x-ray appears over-simplified and un-dimensional. Incapable of reading the many changes under way and the concrete practices of interconnection.

While being analytically important, these two trends in interpretations have contributed little to setting off reflections on the role of the Net and the new media in the processes of relaunching or re-vitalizing the public sphere. Especially because – beyond not having sufficient awareness of contextual transformations – they omit any discussion over the passing of an era: the hypothesis of a re-definition of publicness starting from a new historico-social context. Hence the proposal to postulate as probable a “cyber-transformation” of the public sphere, because we find ourselves in front of a transition change between one model of democracy (and public sphere) typical of the so-called audience democracy and a possible new structure of

democratic society in the wake of a series of processes of social change which are modifying the very bases of the role and nature of the public sphere. Within such processes the birth and development of new forms of mediatisation (languages, communicative formats, discursive practices, etc) question the profile and configuration of the media arena, complicate it (the classic alternative on-line/off-line), highlight its potentiality and limits but within a considerably modified social context”²¹.

And here Dahlgren is right when he stigmatizes pessimistic or dismissive readings of the role of the Net just like the too optimistic ones) because the starting point is always the presence of traces, still limited but rich with evolutive potentiality, which signal the emergence of new forms of publicness, different from the traditional ones but not for this extraneous to the spirit and role of the public sphere. To use the words of Dahlgren himself (2005: 160):

«Internet is the advanced point of evolution of the public sphere, and if the dispersion of public sphere in general is contributing to the already destabilized system of political communication specific counter-public spheres in Internet are also helping citizens involved in playing a role in the development of a new democratic politics ».

In an attempt to follow this line of reasoning and discuss this issue more analytically, we can here put forward several cognitive hypotheses and some alternative interpretations.

The re-politicisation of the public sphere via the net as a consequence of the emergence of a controversial political communication?

Right from its first historico-social structures, the public sphere has had a double profile. On one side it has been the cognitive-symbolic context in which the model of the nationalisation of the masses has been pursuing through the symbolic use of politics via the media system. On the other, it has also become the site for comparison and discussion to affirm the rights of the new rising classes, promote new forms of bottom-up participation and state alternative ideas and values also as the basis for a social and democratic society. And we have already recalled how

²¹ According to Lievrouw and Livingstone, one of the principal features of the “social modelling” produced by the new media is the recombination processes: « Recombination has two main forms – convergence and divergence – both easily observable in the development of the technologies of the new media, the forms of the message, social practices and cultural-economic institutions » (2007: XVIII).

this ambivalence must be analyzed as being linked to and socially constructed by the historical structure that such dynamics assume.

And is this interpretative paradigm of a public sphere still valid today, in full development of ICT. A public sphere which appears instead not only in the old media arena but also in the World Wide Web dominated everywhere by economic logic, marketing and advertising, besides the fragmentation and dispersion of subjectivity? Is the category of “audience democracy” still heuristic for describing the present composition of the national and transnational (de-publicizing) public sphere? Or is it possible to identify clues and practices which can relaunch publicness in this new context? To answer these questions we need more empirical analysis and some theoretical re-definitions.

It may be true, as some hold, that there is under way a top-down pseudo-politicisation of the public sphere, especially via the increasing overcoming of the intermediation dispositions which alone can guarantee in social practice respect for the rules of discussion, the choices of the issues to put on the agenda, reciprocal debating guaranteeing impartial roles, correctness in arguing (the poisoned truths which Franca D’Agostini (2010) speaks). However, it is also beyond doubt that with the spread of the net we note dynamics of re-politicisation bottom-upwards through communicative forms, languages and experiences of social interaction that contrast, resist and oppose the regression of the public sphere towards “mass conformity”. These new repertoires of communicative agency present different features from the traditional ones based on cognitive and argumentative practices. Therefore, it seems necessary to put greater focus on this empirical evidence using the notion of “contentious politics” elaborated by Tilly and Tarrow (2008) in reference to social movements and apply it to these new forms of political communication spread mostly by the Web²².

In the present pluralisation of the public sphere – from the global to the virtual nourished by the ICT and the old national ones – communicative, cognitive and symbolic competition between old/ new forms of politics, participation and intermediation has become by now the

²² As is well-known, the concept of “contentious politics” was adopted to distinguish the collective action of social movements (and their ground for political struggles). In this paper I extend the term to indicate a particular form of political communication which refers back to the kinds of on-line communicative agency referring to civil society (and therefore movements) instead of the political institutions.

normal articulation of all modalities of publicness. Furthermore, in front of the discursive and /or deliberative practices of an argumentative matrix – always less legitimized and deployed, or victim of a molecular segmentation - we find ourselves today with a wider and more varied repertoire of communicative acts which are also at once explicit forms of political agency – political agency as communicative action and vice versa – and that move on a new integrated platform of publicness. A cognitive and performative platform where, public and private, individual and collective, reason and feeling, interaction and organisation, information and mobilisation, all cohabit and intertwine on-line and off-line – dimensions these which are always more characteristic and constituent of the communicative flows present in the movements, civil society, territory, virtual communities and social networks.

In this sense a possible cyber-transformation not only indicates a regressive tendency towards the control, management and normalisation of the public debate (a historically uneliminable tendency in the metaphor of a democratic “Leviathan”) but can also express opposite dynamics which aim to claim the conflicting dimension and therefore fully political in communicative action as such, within this strategic context for the destinies of democratic societies. Consequently widespread communicative power (Habermas 2006; Castells 2009) – made more evident by the evolution of technologies and the always more generalized and personalized capillarity – therefore becomes a more accessible resources, albeit distributed in an uneven and differentiated way per areas of influence. It brings to the centre of the discussion on the nature and function of the public sphere the latent but never completely hidden theme of “communication for power” and not only of “communication for influence on power and government resolution.”

From this point of view then perhaps we should bring in other terms from our scientific and cultural vocabulary. Side by side with the notions of political debate and deliberative communication, we need to speak more precisely of “contentious political communication,” with reference to the repertoires of specific communicative actions which point at constructing political conflicts in order to defend and extend democracy in the frame of what we have already defined “post-politics”. A “communication marked by conflict” which does not attempt to wield influence over power, but denounces (contests) the structure of power in a society which

has to become authentically democratic. (Fraser 2006). These new emancipative requests which emerge in late modernity democracies add therefore new functions to the communicative practices of the public sphere: not only discussion but also claims, not only different opinions on issues and policies of general interest but also the expression of new needs and non-institutional politics, not only cognitive negotiations over specific choices and emergencies but also the proclamation of new belongings and new identities, direct cultural acknowledgements and affirmations of individual and social empowerment

Consequently the processes of individualisation, new forms of political agency and new communicative opportunities offered by Internet and digital communication have also brought to the surface as constituent of the public sphere also this second typology of discursiveness and public comparison – more precisely “controversial and claiming” - opening the way also to a restructuring of public spaces connected to *publicness*. It is what happens in what Dahlgren (2005) calls “multisectorial on-line public spheres” or what have more simply been referred to as “public counter-spheres” (Negt, Kluge 1979; Fraser 1992). In fact, in these new “publicizing contexts” – mostly promoted by the Network and its linguistic and communicative applications – what mostly characterizes communicative agency is not so much the cognitive quality of the interaction on collectively recognized issues and commons subjected to political decisions, but more the controversial nature of the positions – hardly ever orientated towards agreement – which find their basis not so much in reasoned argumentation as in the individual affirmation of civicness, in the call for recognition of a political subjectivity (albeit partial or sectorial).

Though in the nineteenth century onwards the idea of *another democracy* was already present in some narrow contexts of sociality (della Porta 2010), nowadays such a second dimension of *publicness* – communicate for power, rights, a fundamental democracy – seems to take on always more importance, more incisive and more explosive value than the traditional thrust towards discussion and collective deliberations. It is on this ground – both extra-

institutional and intra-social - that network mediated communicative flows assume an increasing importance²³.

The new reference context for mature democracies - not necessarily condemned to post-democracy as Crouch feared (2003) - is formed of more and more individualized societies in which the multiplication of the action areas and the pluralisation of walks of life go on redefining belongings, though threats to living standards and conditions are on the increase, further exposing the distancing from the democratic institutions, (but not necessarily from the idea of democracy - Bennett 1998). In this context it is evident that the cyber-transformation of the public sphere is not to be investigated only on the ground of public discussion (its transparency), the deliberative arena (its efficacy), the relation between local and global (its generability), but also and mainly its new communicative articulation. An articulation that is partly participative by nature because it is linked to its capacity to answer just in time to an agency request bound to the right to empowerment and attention-seeking (especially the young, women, volunteer groups, non-profit organisations alter-global movements). It is partly propelled by its political nature, because it is linked to the claims of new forms of democratic sociality not subordinated to the logics of the political-institutional but connected to an anti-plebiscitary, more shared politics. If the empirical evidence of a further complexity of the communicative apparatus of the publicness of the societies of the second modernity is well-founded, it is necessary to elaborate a more articulated typology of contemporary public sphere by means of the recognition of a dual communicative dimension. A summary is reproduced in the table below.

Table 1 – Communication flows in the contemporary public sphere: a typology

<i>Format</i>	Deliberative political communication	Contraversial political communication
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²³ On the different capacities of movements in comparison to parties to use the Network and *networking* to stimulate participation and mobilisation, see Bentivegna (2002).

<i>Aim</i>	Debate issues of collective interest, construct consensus over choices via argumentation, influence government's political decisions	Claim rights, reverse institutional politics, re-discuss power in democracy
<i>Context</i>	mainstream public spheres	Counter public or multi-sectorial spheres
<i>Arena</i>	Mass media, analogical media, public of spectators	individualized media, inter-active digital media, public of activists
<i>Participation</i>	Indirect, filtered by intermediation (or dis- intermediation roles and dispositions)	Direct, equipped with <i>empowerment</i> and civic self-advertising

Consequently, if this new articulation of the discursive and communicative context of the public sphere of mature democracies – an articulation which is also the product of modernisation and the processes of democratisation albeit discontinuously – seems to respond better to the interpretation of the phenomena under way, it is evident that the Net's contribution to the re-organisation of mediatised public space is to be analyzed in a more different and articulated way than is usual. It is also evident that this new possible configuration of publicness on the bases of social practices and cultural and political power forces present in society, can open the way to a new phase of development in democracy marked both by partly new modes of participation, and a more ample and diversified range of repertoires of public and political communication, which may also be conflictual within the public sphere.

A suggestion for interpreting the transition: from the "audience democracy" to the "democracy of individualized citizens"?

Although many somewhat acritical supporters of the potentiality of the Net push towards a model of "direct democracy" as the final goal of this process of cyber-transformation of the public sphere, the thread of the discourse followed up to now leads us to disagree with such a decisive forecast (just as we criticized the opposite approach based on the presumed end of the

public sphere and its complete submission to political and economic power). It is the case of trying to elaborate an interpretative hypothesis which follows the line of argumentation of this paper and attempts to outline a new phase of the transformation of democratic society which can be sited beyond “audience democracy” within necessarily falling into an ambiguous and somewhat disturbing “post-democracy”. In brief, my suggestion puts forward the hypothesis that having associated with the audience democracy a phase of de-publicizing the public sphere (and therefore weakening democracy in society), as the conclusion of a historic phase dominated by the old media in the role of the central interactive nucleus in the media arena, the new media and the net allow us to posit a transition both of publicness and the processes of democratisation towards a different configuration of contemporary society.

It can therefore be held that after Manin’s well-known division into “parliamentary democracy”, “party democracy” and “audience democracy” there are the historico-social conditions today to arrive at prefiguring what may be a more mature “individualized citizens’ democracy”. The evidence gathered here can reasonably promote this cause, especially because transformations both in communicative processes and in the way to understand and relate to politics have been underscored.

We have, however already mentioned how this process with its increasing conflictual dynamics means that a positive, painless outcome cannot be taken for granted. It calls for a conceptual revision of the founding categories of the democracy sphere categories in the triangle democracy - public sphere - communication flows, and brings about at the same time a realignment between the normative principles of publicness and the democratic practices of new citizenship. Let us see some of the points which could be used.

- a) According to Beck’s paradigm of reflexive modernity, the “individualized citizen” of the third millennium is very different from forecasts by both liberal democratic and democratic mass societies. He is in fact working always more towards the “personalisation” of all social practices, localistic and transnational in his cultural orientations with few signs of contradictions, little inclined to collective solidarity and more interested in cooperating for immediate limited aims, disillusioned and illuded at the same time by the very radical modernity which has reared and socialized him for these increasing expectations of self-

realisation, needing new belongings while being the same time prisoner of an unstable solipsism, aware of his own rights but reluctant or incapable of putting forward requests which are not only individualistic. He is, in other words the ambivalent product of at least two centuries of a political, economic and cultural democratic socialisation, which has formed for better or for worse his civic personality and social singularity²⁴. A citizen who no longer believes in delegating alone and being represented as the only bases of his “citizens’ rights”, in that he considers it too little for his *empowerment* and self-realisation. He is however aware of the need to re-mobilize when his own life (biological, affective, social and cultural) is to be protected from the uncontrollable threats of economic and scientific development and the excessive power of multinational elites, in order to safeguard his material and immaterial habitat from systems and institutions undergoing ever increasing bureaucratisation. Democracy therefore is no longer just a form of government based on representation being delegated or on time scales (elections falling due). It is also a social configuration which implies a different quality of life and therefore calls for more direct self-promotion, the responsibility and political immediacy of personal involvement, hands-on with targets (like rubbish dumping, trees being felled to make way for motor-ways/parking lots, farming areas being cemented over, air pollution, the privatisation of water).

- b) The “individualized citizen” of the 21st Century is not only male, adult, white, educated, western, “committed” but he is, at times, unaware, *cosmopolitan* and *transversal* in the fullest sense of the word. Which tends to activate multi-gender, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic public spheres which multiply languages, claims for rights, positions being taken up, communicative formats, interactive and relational modalities, no longer with hierarchies of role and social positions. In this new context of *publicness* two distinct discursive dimensions both of which provide the basis of citizenship: *cittadinanza*: the argumentative-deliberative and claiming controversial, which exist and further intertwine particularly in the Net. Democracy therefore is no longer the search for consensus (also within political dialectics) but is always more

²⁴ In reconstructing the historical path of individualization, Privitera observes: «The Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and especially the affirmation of capitalism with the birth of an autonomous civil society capable of reproducing itself without the intervention of the political authorities contribute to creating a historical constellation which had never before taken place, in which the individual begins to understand him/herself not starting with a political collectivity demanding dedication and unconditioned loyalty, but from the universe of his individual life » (2001: 31).

unnegotiable dissense. It is not only respecting the rules but also calling for new rules. It is not only discussions and decisions but also “civil expression” self-organisation, daily political practice in the first person²⁵.

- c) The “individualised citizen” is more and more “publicly connected” (Couldry, Livingstone, Markham 2007), i.e. always more immersed in a communicative and symbolic context with high sociability, per force interdependent and intertwined with other subjectivities, who can also produce different levels of information (according to different dimensions of mediatisation and territorial scaling.). Always more rarely however, is he thrust towards disconnection, precisely because of the ubiquity, convergence and pervasiveness of the mobile technologies of communication and the cognitive products veheled (perhaps more ludic and light-hearted than political and prosocial). This new scenario for participation (at times spontaneous intermittent, even non civic²⁶) composed of a multiplication of immaterial relations at the centre of everyday life does not eliminate the famous problem of the uninformed general public in democracies (Lippman 1963). It limits it to the first discursive-deliberative dimension of the public sphere while attributing less relevance to the second dimension - demanding, self-acclaiming, aiming at self-realisation, controversial²⁷. It is here then that a different political request for democratic participation can be developed, which does not lead to an impracticable “direct democracy”, if with this term we mean actual self government by the people, but rather to an almost Habermas-like redefinition of democracy itself as an intertwining and permanent conflict among social systems and worlds-in-life, between government and cultures of the civil society, institutional power and individual empowerment.

²⁵ For example, on political activism in the field of criticism against consumerism and the relation between individual participation and alternative practices in solidarity purchasing groups cfr. Tosi (2006).

²⁶ Bennets remarks that “instead of recording the disappearance of civic cultures, many nations are experimenting with the birth of more neutral political forms which could be termed non civic... what is most clearly non-civic in this emerging culture is the disappearance of the cadres of inactive citizens ready to mobilise when the leaders ring the bell of political commitment. Where the tradition civil society was there is now a less conformist society, characterized by the birth of the networkd, thematic associations, aggregations based on life styles, and helped by the revolution in personalized communication and *point-to-point* » (1998: 745).

²⁷ This would explain the apparent coarseness or inculture of much on-line discursiveness. It would be inappropriate to deliberative discourse, but fits in with controversial kinds, where good reasoning counts for less than the demanding nature of such discourse.

In this light, a possible transit towards a “democracy of individualized citizens” shows itself as both a utopia and a dystopia, depending on the resolution or not of what is unstable, conflictual and competitive. The difference between the two possible outcomes will certainly have to pass through the reconceptualisation of the public sphere as the new context for public communication and social reflexivity, but will have inevitably to rethink the dispositions for the *intermediation, recombination and interaction* of communicative practices and symbolic actions that the changed reality calls for²⁸.

If the Net seems to carry out a different role according to the type of communication agency it puts into the field – facilitate controversial political action, fragment and disperse argumentative and deliberative forms - and if bottom-up political agency seems less and less in line with the politics offered by the institutions, it will then be necessary to re-examine the specific statutes of publicness, and the relation between daily democratic practices and democratic government. A new season of theoretical reflections and empirical research opens, which must make an effort to realign social transformation with the ingredients of the democratic paradigm, with no exceptions and no short cuts. In fact, either Democracy serves to make a better life or it will have no future. But our lives can only be better in a truly democratic society. With this dilemma the destiny of modernity comes to a close, as far as we know.

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²⁸ In this context the contrast between dis-intermediation processes and re-intermediation mechanisms (Edwards 2006; Blanchard 2009), takes on a different importance, since the role of the net in the cyber-transformation of the public sphere is not played on this terrain alone, but also on the forms of management and organisation of the new bottom-up languages and interactive modes.

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