

The Role of Digital Culture in Neoliberal Deliberative Decision-Making Processes

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Inhoudsopgave

Introduction.....	3
1. Issues of Neoliberalism.....	5
Neoliberalism contextualised.....	6
Neoliberalism, culture and digitisation.....	8
2. Context and definition: Online deliberate decision-making in Western democracies	9
Types of Democracy.....	9
Internet and the Public Sphere.....	11
3. Digital Culture	13
Digital Culture: its relation to the public sphere.....	13
What is internet culture?.....	13
The role of public opinion expressed through in digital culture in decision-making. .	16
Benkler's requirements of the chosen digital cultural objects.....	18
Memes	18
Hacktivism	20
Reddit.....	23
Concluding.....	26
Works Cited.....	29

Preface

Writing this thesis as part of my graduation was the biggest eye-opener during my studies at the University of Utrecht. The constant flow of courses and 'in-between-papers' is breached and the anticipation of finishing my work inspired me with a continued energy, stamina and determination I had not yet experienced. The realisation that a relatively small formation of knowledge requires so much time and effort made me realise that writing a graduation thesis is only the beginning. Of course, I hope that the following thesis in quality measures up to the quantity of energy.

Two persons who have supported me in writing my thesis deserve my thanks. First, Ryanne Turenhout for giving feedback on the use of my sources and detailed suggestions in regards to my assumptions. Second, Maria Koomen for extensively and critically editing reviewing my English thesis, checking both language and content. Third, Imar de Vries who's most important contributions were critical feedback and the reminder that this thesis contributes to Digital Humanities. Finally, my thanks go to Marianne van den Boomen, who has helped me gain new insights in writing this thesis.

Introduction

Neoliberalism has been under discussion for a long time but the recently developing discourse concerning the financial crisis outlines issues fuelled by underlying neoliberal ideology, for which financial institutions, governments, and (major) corporations are often thought to be partially responsible (Volkskrant Binnenland, Volkskrant Archief, Socialistworker). Neoliberalism, as the guiding ideology of most contemporary Western democracies, eliminates part of the deliberative process (Couldry 5). Governmental decision-making ignores the political discourse that exists online, and therewith prioritises the neoliberal ideology; the focus on neoliberal ideology leaves no room to equally consider other options (Kennedy). Conceptually, neoliberalism is elusive since it can be defined as both a holistic concept as well as a set of principles, complicating its understanding (Kjeaar & Pedersen qtd. in Campbell & Pedersen 269, Hesmondhalgh 104). The overarching problem the neoliberal ideology creates is a destruction of the deliberative representative decision-making process that is standard in most Western societies (discussed in Chapter 2).

If neoliberalism is used as a basis to govern society, governments must address the issues it creates, and carry out the critical reflection such a political philosophy requires. Public and political deliberation takes place in and around initiatives, such as The Occupy Movement, Anonymous, Wikileaks, and Reddit, that are rarely part of official political movements. These initiatives can create pressure points in political processes shaping the political discourse. In this respect, they deserve more attention for their ability to facilitate the deliberative decision-making process (Lahusen 55). Public opinion, according to Bishop is a sum of separate views (1). It should form the basis of government: “Without the support of public opinion it forfeits the right to govern and rule” (Sharma & Sharma 267). Yet, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu claims that public opinion only informs us about those who design or use the tools required to measure such sentiments (Champagne 114). To Bourdieu, there is no public opinion, meaning the public opinion charted by research is shaped, not pre-existent (ibid). Additionally, such practices divide society between proposing or opposing an idea while creating the illusion of having a political influence (Manin 173-174). If public opinion is seen as a deliberative process rather than a product finalise a discussion on one topic, it can better inform governments to make better decisions (Cain 276). Public opinion as an informative and deliberative process is not to be found in newspapers or polls, but in digital culture.

According to philosopher, economist, and one of the main contributors of early neoliberalism Friedrich Hayek, culture is crucial to a political philosophy as its task of spreading tacit knowledge forms the basis of a (self-regulating) society with minimum government intervention (O'Brien & Penna 83). Although governments justify minimal intervention without considering the deliberation of citizens educated through tacit knowledge, the same tacit knowledge is required to support the self-regulating society. What this exactly means for the original interpretation and obligatory inclusion of culture as Hayek foresaw, will be researched in this thesis.

The study of digital humanities considers power struggles in a neoliberal and digital environment. Jelte Timmer describes how in a Web 2.0 environment the neoliberal subject protests hegemonic structures, in which Web 2.0 potentially creates alternatives to these structures (31-32). Political theorist Jodi Dean has developed the concepts of neoliberalism, governments and communication technology in depth, while Yochai Benkler, digital society and information scholar, has offered insight to the understanding of how our digital environment restructures the relationships between culture, economy, politics and society. Following and supplementing the body of research laid by Dean and Benkler, this thesis will highlight the role of digital culture, positioning it as a centrefold to these topics. Specifically, this thesis investigates the role of digital culture in decision-making processes. How does the neoliberal ideology interrupt the deliberative process which supports democratic decision-making? Has deliberation become increasingly digitised and is the digitisation of democratic processes rightly criticised or even acknowledged? Can we say that the role of culture defined by Hayek is still relevant in the contemporary political system, despite its digitisation? Can digital culture still contribute to deliberation in the public sphere as “an arena for rational argument” and if so, what is the relationship between decision-making and digital culture (Paley 497)?

In order to understand the role of digital culture in political decision-making contextual components need first be investigated. Chapter 1 introduces 'the problem of neoliberalism' and its relation to deliberative decision-making. Chapter 2 continues to explore deliberative decision-making processes and (e-)democracy, considering how the public sphere is becoming increasingly digital. Chapter 3 continues to investigate what digitisation means for culture, whether digital culture exists as a separate culture or not, and its place in public discourse. By investigating how digital culture presents itself, the question of whether digital culture plays a role in deliberative decision-making processes will be explored. Three digital cultural movements which both carry the public opinion and are politically relevant are chosen as cases: memes, hacktivism and Reddit discussion boards. The following analysis of these cases is aimed at the discourse that they instigate and explores if and how digital culture facilitates deliberative decision-making.

1. Issues of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism can be defined as “a set of economic principles that came to prominence in the early 1980's,” based on the assumption that an economy is most efficient when it is self-sufficient (Gallaher 152). This set of principles is perceived as continually privileging “the interests of the most wealthy corporations, states and individuals” (Hesmondhalgh 104). An overarching problem neoliberal ideology creates is the destruction of deliberative representative decision-making processes standard to most Western societies (discussed in Chapter 2). It does so by eliminating integral parts from the deliberative process which remain intact in digital culture (discussed in Chapter 3). The overarching problem consists of the following issues: first, neoliberalism as a concept is elusive, thus difficult to research properly; second, its elusiveness increases a sense of powerlessness in deliberating parties; third, this sense of powerlessness is increased by ignoring the discussion about the topics related to and governed by neoliberalism and politics. This powerlessness and lack of political engagement is described by Manuel Castells, information technology scholar, as partially stemming from the development of online political discourses that is not or is ineffectively included in the deliberative decision-making process (184-185). Finally, the diminishing of neoliberalism from a political philosophy into an ideology, partially reinforced by the issues above, stem from a neglecting culture as a conductor of political discourse.

The elusive nature of neoliberalism is based on three findings; first, governments do not consider themselves neoliberal; second, neoliberalism is often seen as a set of principles based on a misunderstanding of the concept (Hesmondhalgh 104). Third, the apparent lack of scrutiny in regards to its terminology (Gramsci's “common-sense”) makes for a fictional common understanding (qtd. in Harvey 48). Neoliberalism is hard to attribute to a specific self-appointed subject because it is often “accused” of being neoliberal. Politicians or proponents of neoliberal ideas do not identify themselves as such (Plehwe, Walpen & Neunhöffer i, Van De Haar 24). A person knows their opinion about a topic but instead of “being neoliberal,” a person can support neoliberal values. With this, as David Hesmondhalgh suggests, neoliberalism is a set of principles rather than one identifiable concept (104). Yet, to claim that neoliberalism does not exist just because the “encounter with a neoliberal in real life is nil,” as Edwin Van De Haar suggests, is to suggest that there are more problems underlying the nature of neoliberalism.

Both a description and example of another problem with neoliberalism's elusiveness, Van De Haar explores the evasiveness of neoliberalism in “The Neoliberal Phantom” (24). He identifies a lack of understanding of neoliberalism amongst academics, the faulty use of the term in academic discourse and its function as a “catchphrase” (Boas & Ganse-Morse 138). In the following explanation, he outlines these misunderstandings, portraying how research fails when neoliberalism is positioned within a context of malevolence (Van De Haar 24-27). He concludes that, since academic research is partially failing to address neoliberalism properly, there is no real, sufficient definition of neoliberalism and further, its existence is imagined. Though some mitigation may be necessary since a three-page article can be considered insufficient to defend one's view, there exist misinterpretations in Van Der Haar's account of the concept. First, he does not distinguish between neoliberalism and liberalism. His classification of libertarianism, classical-liberalism and social-liberalism should include neoliberalism alongside these dimensions as it is another variety of liberalism (ibid.). Yet instead, he positions neoliberalism as a replacement of liberalism, equating them. Second, the academic issues in the research on “the problem of neoliberalism” that Van Der Haar mentions, form the backbone of the idea that if neoliberalism is researched incorrectly, it cannot be researched at all and therefore neoliberalism does not exist. What Van De Haar lacks to recognise is that neoliberalism is not a political philosophy like liberalism but an ideology, very different in nature than the liberal political philosophy.

This discussion is couched in a larger debate. The reason for Van Der Haar's denial of the existence of neoliberalism is that it is separable from its set of principles. This creates an axis for the 'amount' of neoliberalism an entity can strive for. Neoliberalism can be both existent and non-existent, depending on which criterion is utilised. The ideal 'end-goal' for neoliberalism would be a conceptual model (explained below) as to how our society should function, which currently exists as incomplete. If neoliberalism is ideological in nature, its realisation would render it non-existent. The other potential of neoliberalism is based on the idea that it is something existent rather than something that is not yet achieved. Every state for example wants to attain various neoliberal goals such as competitiveness, a certain degree of profitability and an efficient financial system. These goals are not ideals, but competences. The 'problem of neoliberalism' starts when other ideals are sacrificed in favour of neoliberalism under the same valour.

One example is the Bush Administration's war in Iraq wherein "the obligation to help spread the spread of freedom" justified what, according to Harvey, many considered a war for profit (6). According to Harvey, author of *A Brief History Of Neoliberalism*, citizens allow their governments to carry out such actions because of what Gramsci calls "common sense" concepts; "profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices" (qtd. in Harvey 48). Such concepts enjoy misunderstanding, meaning that the concepts are so pervasive and embedded in our culture that everyone understands them. Simultaneously, its meaning is so ubiquitous that variations of understandings of the concept evolve, leading to misunderstanding between parties. In the case where debating parties share an understanding, concession is minimized and discussion is therefore redundant. After all, for example 'freedom' is an ideal which 'we all' understand and should strive for. In effect, the explanation of ontological problems or policy-design problems for example are no longer adhered to through deliberative decision-making or consulting of the public sphere. "Common sense" concepts play a major role in neoliberal discourse; they create a vacuum for deliberative decision-making. The exclusion of public discourse leads to a sense of public powerlessness, or the idea that public-political engagement (or with the public) is declining. Further, it increases the credibility of the notion that there is no need to include public deliberation need not be included in political decision-making processes.

One way to counter such perceived powerlessness, according to social activist Naomi Klein, is by opening the discourse to the public like the Occupy Movement . It gained traction worldwide aiming to spread awareness about and directing actions advocating at economic and social justice (The 99-Declaration). Klein claims The Occupy Movement "really changed the conversation (...) there was something about the framing – we are the 99% - that opened up a space to talk about equality (...) it was really a discussion about values" (McKenzie). The "silent conversation" between members of the Occupy Movement and the bankers on Wall Street passing by, highlighted a sense of shame and continued "putting the spotlight on the nexus between corporate power and political power" (ibid.). Klein's description exemplifies Jürgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere: "an arena for rational argument" (Paley 497). It is also is "a network for communicating information and points of view" (Benkler 181). The space where valuation and discussion of political ideas takes place is taken to the streets; trying to further open up a deliberative process, the protesters aim to change the course of decision-making. How this takes place can be understood considering the role of culture in neoliberalism and deliberation.

Neoliberalism contextualised

Contemporary neoliberalism is defined as "a set of economic principles that came to prominence in the early 1980s" (Gallaher 152). Also known as "The Washington Consensus", "thatcherism", "monetarism", today "most states in the world employ a neoliberal approach" (ibid.). Keynesianism and the Chicago School of Economics, or Neo-Keynesianism, formed the two precursory movements of neoliberalism, of which the latter prioritises the principle

of self-regulating capital (Palley 1). Its successful implementation during the mid 1970s including in the U.K. and the U.S., is partially explained by the substantial division of the two concepts of Keynesianism (ibid. 2). Traditional Keynesianism takes into account differences in for example bargaining power and can be seen as the human-centred interpretation. It is arguably the accurate interpretation in that it considers markets to be not self-regulating (Coddington 47). This is important because the market principle has been used as a guiding principle in policy-design, meaning that the self-regulating principle has been projected on to society at large, and seen by some as one of the major issues underlying neoliberal ideology (Mouffe 60-61). The reason Neo-Keynesianism was successful was because traditional Keynesianism failed “to develop public understandings of the economy that could compete with the neoliberal rhetoric of 'free markets'” (Palley 3). This shows how important the public understanding is in deciding which principles to direct the decision-making process.

Hayek saw neoliberalism as a political philosophy to guide society (O'Brien & Penna 83). It was to include culture and cultural institutions such as the family, the church and other social entities in order to educate tacit knowledge (ibid). This would help educate citizens, making for a liberal, “spontaneous order” (ibid.). This forms the backbone of the argument that governments should intervene minimally with societal matters because they can never know everything, which would cause state guidance to be flawed. Under these conditions only could Hayek's idea be relevant. Habermas' notion of the normative deliberative process of decision-making was aimed at consensus and equal contribution; without equal contribution the process would be invalid. In contrast, Hayek's neoliberal interpretation any outcome based on a spontaneous order as the right outcome since tacit knowledge would support an equal contribution and development of its citizens. Whether this idea is 'right' or not, it is based on “values or principles” that are necessary to the validation of any political philosophy (Weale 518). Hayek's neoliberalism outlines certain assumptions about what knowledge we have access to and how we should act upon it. It is reflective, sets requirements, and lends itself for creating guidelines for political reasoning and decision-making (Kreyche 82). In doing so, it forms a fundamental body of ideas and questions about its own political philosophy (Lane). However, contemporary neoliberalism is not reflective and its principles are not interdependent; its principles are usable under any condition as long as the ideal of the market-model is aspired to.

Contemporary neoliberalism projects its market-principles on society. Although its set of principles is not formed as a set of ethical regulations but it is visible in discourse by a distinguishable terminology. Terms that describe neoliberalism in relation to the state include “closed”, “rigid”, “group, lobby, holism”, “uniformity” and “autocratic” (qtd. in McGuigan 233). A neoliberal ideology depicts the government as a slow moving body of uniform, totalitarian, and impenetrable entity. Neoliberalism itself is presented by very different terms; “freedom”, “flexible”, “open”, “future”, “growth”, “individualism” and “collectivism”, and finally “democracy” (ibid.). A kind of cherry picking can be witnessed since on the one hand the neoliberal ideology depicts the government as slow and massive, yet the same government that is to provide democracy and freedom is denied such associations which are projected by/with neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, culture and digitisation

Hayek's idea of how tacit knowledge should spread is no longer valid. In large parts of the Western world this knowledge is spread less frequently in churches or the family as centrefold of society. The same can be said of Habermas' public sphere and requirements of deliberation; Though the specific formats may have changed, the same activities still take place yet in a digital format. In his book *The Wealth of Networks. How social production transforms our markets and freedom*, the digital society and information scholar, Benkler, explains how "the Information revolution" is not a naïve notion thriving on ICT development, but a structural force that underlies everything on which our society is based; from democracy and economy to culture and the public sphere (1). Benkler witnesses a shift from an "industrial" mode of maintaining society to a networked information society which allows "a series of economic, social, and cultural adaptations that make possible a radical transformation of how we make the information environment we occupy as autonomous individuals, citizens and members of cultural and social groups" (Benkler 1).

If neoliberalism is a perspective from which society should be guided, it must extend its embrace to include deliberation, acknowledging the discourse developing in digital culture. This requires both an investigation into how neoliberalism politics are valued in online discourse, and how the discussion concerning its ideals takes place in a public sphere that exists in a hybrid space (De Souza e Silva). Further, a clear understanding of (digital) deliberative decision-making, the digital public sphere, and digital culture is necessary. What is the relation between our digitised society and decision-making process guided by neoliberalism? Is proper deliberative decision making possible when it is based on digital discourse; does digital culture provide the spread of tacit knowledge; does it play a role in the involvement of the public in political topics, and does it help the public put forward a stance on political topics and is digital culture able to establish a role in decision-making? The next chapter will explore deliberative decision making in Western democracies and how part of the process is digitising. In Chapter 3, digital culture will be further explored and positioned in the digital deliberative decision-making process in order to provide insight into the issues laid out above.

2. Context and definition: Online deliberate decision-making in Western democracies

In the last fifty years, The internet has evolved from an electronic decentralised communication tool for military purposes, to an information exchange network for scientists and researchers, from an overestimated commercial tool (for example, the Dotcom Bubble), to the Web 2.0 hype that still proliferates in today's internet-backbone of society.

Both visibly and invisibly, internet supports our daily activities. Each to their own, internet offers an “*imaginaire*”, an idea, hope or fear, to all of us: a “designers' and promoters' *imaginaire*”, a “scientific community's idea”, new economies, loss of bodily obstruction and an “end of politics” (Flichy). Another one of these *imaginaires* is the idea of democracy online. It is difficult to define what an e-democracy, a cyberdemocracy, democracy in a virtual realm or the advent of online processes in democracy mean. As political scientist Robert Dahl already noted in 1956: “(...) there is no democratic theory – there are only democratic theories”. This notion in combination with the ubiquitous nature of internet requires an identification of our current democratic model, how it has been interpreted in relation to internet, and finally what this relation means to the decision-making process involved.

In relation to e-democracy, the *imaginaire* generally holds that (e)-democracy is “a good thing” (Sen qtd. in Saward 23). It is also seen as the “default mode” of contemporary society while internet provides the potential for increased direct decision making (Grönlund 23). However, possibilities of democracy online have been questioned regularly (Sunstein). Castells rightly wonders if the internet “plays a purely instrumental role” or if “a transformation of the rules” takes place in regards to political and social engagement in our web-based society (Castells 137). The answer to this question will facilitate an analysis of the current e-democracy status, its decision-making process, and the potential and added value of reintegrated public opinion as a deliberative process. There are two approaches that can be taken: first, an analysis that assumes democracy, decision making, and internet are integrated, meaning that for example democracy is inherent to the web, yet this will be avoided to overcome teleological or utopian tendencies; second, the analysis can take an approach based on separability, meaning that each of the items will be investigated separately assuming they are not inherently related but randomly combined. It is clear that neither is completely correct and that both approaches offer valuable insights, but the approach of separability allows a clearer definition of the concepts and their relation to internet, intrinsic or not.

Types of Democracy

The current democratic model in Western-Europe and North-America according to Fitzpatrick can be categorised as deliberative, according to Janda et al. as representative, and according to Grönlund and the Economist as consensual. The representative model consists of two main interpretations: a majoritarian model and a pluralist model. The first

still allows “the mass public” to control government actions, but requires citizens to be informed to some degree (Janda et al. 33). The main critique here is that evidence suggests the masses required for the model to function are hardly politically engaged or informed (ibid.). An alternative is the pluralist model that does not require knowledge from the masses and relies on interest groups to defend the masses' interests (ibid.). This can be considered as a multi-party government consisting of more than two political parties, which is increasingly a standard in Western Europe (Dunleavy & Margetts 295-297).

The multi-party model is closely connected with the notion of a democratic model based on consensus. The representative, plural party system that defends certain interests also creates opposing stakes: “Contrary to popular belief, consensus democracy is not so much based on consensus, but on dissensus” (Hendriks 66). The first aim amongst multiple parties is to safeguard their own stakes even when at times some sacrifices have to be made. The second is to ensure that their stakes are attended to by creating more agreement about that stake in a heterogeneous society. One way to achieve this is through deliberation which is based on the ideal of rationalisation, meaning that certain views can be defended by an organised set of motivations (Gaus 205). The broader interpretation holds that subjects are to be involved in discussing the motives of a political entity that is electable to make a motivated choice. Since the people do not engage in decision-making about society's issues directly, the voter only needs to organise and negotiate with themselves and others their ideas about the view or decisions that a political party endeavours. Though deliberation amongst representatives will not always lead to consensus, *if* consensus is the goal, deliberation is required (Smith 59). Deliberation itself, however, has some requirements.

In *Democracy and other Neoliberal Fantasies*, Dean notes that in order for a deliberative democracy to be valid, the outcomes of political processes are not only to be deliberated, but they also have to be deliberative in nature (77). Thus, a separation is made between processes that has to be deliberative, and norms, meaning certain standards, are to be discussed. Further, a decision-making process includes the act of identifying values that an outcome should adhere to by rationalising the issues at hand. Several roles or dimensions can be ascribed to each of the properties ('representative', 'consensual', 'deliberative'). A representative model indicates a structure or dimension of efficiency or structure. This “democratic machinery” is aimed at structuring the massive amount of opinions, gathering and re-dividing them according to a set of principles considered representative of the ideas of large populations (Van Den Hoven 52). Consensus is the normative dimension. In relation to a deliberative model, consensus forms the “reason-giving and authoritative role in the deliberation and choices of individual citizens” (Cohen 274). The aim to create consensus indicates a concept of what is desirable and to be achieved; the norm is that the decisions eventually taken reflect everyone's interests in a satisfactory manner.

A third dimension is that of the decision-making process which is formed by deliberation. The deliberative decision-making process is based on the requirements of first, an “inclusive constraint,” meaning the lack of “authoritarian schemes” and aimed at equal participation; second, a “judgemental constraint,” meaning conscious and rational voting instead of spontaneous, self-assumptive voting; third, a “dialogical constraint” meaning the deliberation should take place in “an open and unforced dialogue” whether in a “centralized forum” or “decentralized contexts” (Pettit 92). These requirements are to be met through the

existence of a public sphere as proposed by Habermas, and which' relation to internet has been extensively researched. Understanding the digital public sphere is central to understanding deliberative decision-making and its relation to internet.

Internet and the Public Sphere

The online public sphere has suffered as much critique as it has received praise. Such views sometimes are fuelled by pessimistic Luddite as well as overly optimistic accounts but it is nonetheless possible to identify a line of critical thought that helps to clarify the relationship between internet and the public sphere. Antje Gimmler provides a modern but a somewhat positivist account of online deliberative democracy and the public sphere. She interprets Habermas' public sphere as "transforming the bourgeois individual (...) into a genuine political actor" by its participation in an "autonomous public sphere" (22). Gimmler argues that deliberative democracy "captures the concept exactly: equal access to available resources; openness in pursuit of particular issues; the disclosure of outer and inner; and a public network of connected participants: all are distinctive features of the normative concept of a critical public sphere." (ibid. 25). Habermas explains the public sphere as "an arena for rational argument leading to consensus" and "a network for communicating information and points of view" (Paley 497, Benkler 181). So an online public sphere has to provide "genuine" political actors, inclusive, judgemental and dialogical demands while creating equality and openness leading to the "arena for rational argument".

Lincoln Dahlberg's research involves a critical investigation of the practices and meanings of Internet use with a particular focus on processes of democratisation (Journal of CMC). In researching e-democracy based on an online public sphere he concludes that, first, autonomy of the online public sphere is limited due to "state and (increasingly) economic interests"; second, the political actor that Gimmler mentions, lacks self-reflection and investigation into its own "cultural values, assumptions, and interests" while "many online forums experience a lack of respectful listening"; and third, that "discourse tends to be (...) dominated by certain individuals and groups" (First Monday.org). His critique is confirmed on several accounts; Habermas' earliest account of the public sphere itself has invoked much protest (Sustein, Rehmann 9).

Opposing Habermas' idea of equal participation in the public sphere, some argue that a consensus on the topic validates a process of power-play that is not necessarily emancipating, meaning the public sphere is not meeting one of its requirements (Lyotard 60-61). This evokes the question that if an online public sphere exists, in what way does it contribute to the empowerment of the public in the current (neoliberal) decision-making process? Additional questions that must be asked are based on Poster's notion that if to Habermas the public sphere is "a homogeneous space of embodied subjects in symmetrical relations, pursuing consensus through the critique and the presentation of validity claims", the term is not applicable to the internet (Poster 209). The internet hardly implies embodiment (though it invokes questions about its nature), homogeneity or symmetrical relations.

If deliberation is thought to be necessary because in decision making there are heterogeneous parties requiring a homogeneous space, deliberation becomes problematic since online places and subjects are harder to identify and label as hetero- or homogeneous.

For example, what is the basis of a homogeneous online space: its equal construction (for example only forums suffice) or its equal aim (for example, the topic should be politics)? What is it about the online public sphere that allows empowered decision-making? Problems exist regarding emancipating participation according to Lyotard (61-62). Additionally, according to Dean, misunderstandings exist about goal oriented deliberative decision-making processes, which must be distinguished from merely deliberating (77). Finally, equal participation in a hierarchical, representative decision-making process is difficult (Michelman 149-151). Such problems and questions have to be addressed in order to give meaning to the digital public sphere and its potentials.

Deliberative and representative democratic decision making processes are at odds in the public sphere since the former relies on equal participation of agents in deliberation, while the second latter relies on an hierarchical structure. In *Expanding the Dialogue: The Internet, Public Sphere, and Transnational Democracy*, James Bohman suggests that “the public sphere be a source of agency” (60). Michelman notes that direct deliberation tends towards problem solving, and indirect deliberative processes offer “epistemic quality” but lack the implementation of knowledge into the eventual official political bodies. Michelman (or he/she) concludes that it would be better to reform to a “public of publics” (149-151). This means that, due to mass-media and language barriers, a scattered public sphere via the internet can even enhance the decision-making process. Therefore, decision-making processes are designed to take into consideration the public opinion present in the online public spheres (ibid.). Bohman's deliberative agency can function while forming a junction between (direct) deliberative and (hierarchical) representative decision making. To generate legitimacy, online deliberation requires at least one representative for a particular group because then it does not matter in terms of equal participation that not *everyone* participates directly and equally participates in the online deliberative process (Malcolm 289).

To summarize, the current democratic decision-making process depending on the public sphere has the potential to be enhanced through online activities, yet evidence of this in a cohesive, continuous practice is hard to come by. Returning to Castells' question concerning the instrumental or transformational role of the internet, it should be noted that the analysis above primarily answers questions aimed at the transformational role of the internet. What does the internet offer for existing democratic decision-making process, and can a supportive public sphere exist? Although constructions which allow the public to implement their opinion into deliberative, representative and consensus-based decision making are possible in theory, these constructions are complex and practically implausible due to institutions of political decision making. Yet it seems hard to conclude internet has nothing to offer to democratic decision-making. The alternative is to see what the internet have to offer a democracy that is not dependent on existing structures. This means evaluating deliberative practices which are not primarily aimed at supporting the existing decision-making process, but can contribute to this process nonetheless.

3. Digital Culture

Digital Culture: its relation to the public sphere

Returning to the question of whether it is possible for the public to participate in the deliberative decision-making process, it is important to return to Hayek's notion that culture is imperative in this process in the context of neoliberalism. If the neoliberal discourse is in part responsible for decreasing the function and need of deliberation, the conclusion from Chapter 1 that culture functions as a basis for decision-making, participating in, and constructing a society, requires investigation of whether culture can enhance the current decision-making process. In this investigation, the digitisation of culture will be discussed first. In this discussion, digital culture is defined in relation to the digital public sphere. It will then focus on examples of digital culture and how, as Benkler questioned, "is a political and public opinion converted into state action?" (180). If this is not possible, does digital culture still contribute to the decision-making process, and if so, how?

There is an immense body of thoughts about culture. According to Raymond Williams it is in fact one of the most complicated concepts in the English language (87). Answers to *how* we understand culture are multiple. There are three modes of understanding culture: as object, as appointing, and as product of our existence. It has been interpreted as objects outside of ourselves, embodied in books, TV, opera or architecture (Gitelman 4). It is seen as identifying or categorising of our (group) identity and that of others (for example 'indigenous people's culture', 'the culture that I belong to') (Macdonald 9-11). And finally, it is seen as our collective mental and emotional effort, or the thoughts and manners which we produce to establish understanding (Burke 6-13). An answer to *what* culture is, is provided by Scruton, philosopher and writer of *Modern Culture*. He explains that there are three types of culture: first, "high culture" defined by a specific body of knowledge, "cultivation" and often seen as elitist; second, "common culture" meaning a "shared spiritual force" to be found in nations where "culture and social membership are the same idea", and; third "popular culture," as suggested by Williams, strengthens one's identity as a structure to rebel against hegemonic elitist culture (1-4). The latter two are most important since an investigation of digital culture considers its potential "shared spiritual force" and the creation of political dissensus through common and popular culture, rather than the 'civilising' of the deliberative decision-making process.

How we define and understand culture is an indication that culture is too pervasive to be understood as a single entity. Attempts to describe culture as an isolated entity, such as in *Modern Culture*, find that it is simple to combine separate perspectives in order to create an understanding. This approach will be employed here in order to make relevant the concept of culture in this thesis. Further, it to elaborate on the relations between internet and culture, digital culture and democracy, and digital culture and decision-making.

What is internet culture?

There are two ways to approach digital culture¹ based on Castells' idea of instrumentality and transformation; first, Castells' instrumentality suggests that internet 'does something to culture', and; second, in line with Castells' remark of transformation, a relatively independent internet culture exists, which supports the notion that some ideas and practices would not have existed without internet. These two ways of understanding online culture are summarised by Lisa Gitelman in *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, with her questioning of what (digital) media mean to us and our experiences:

"If media are sites for experiences of meaning— critics have pondered—to what degree are meaning and its experience determined or circumscribed by technological conditions? (...) Or are experiences of meaning more rightly produced than determined and imposed?" (8-9).

Both approaches are informative and cannot be understood separately. A distinction can be made, however, between definitions based on instrumentality, covering the more descriptive ideas of Mark Poster, Gitelman, and David Porter. The transformative interpretation of digital culture can be divided into three positivistic ideas: a phenomenological and carefully optimistic approach by Henry Jenkins and Pierre Lévy, and based on the work of Howard Rheingold, a future-minded approach from Sara Kiesler, and finally a more descriptive and critical approach by Kevin Robins, Frank Webster, and James Slevin. Since Poster creates an overview of characteristics of digital culture, this is our starting point.

Despite complexity of the concept of culture, Poster, in *What's the Matter with the Internet?*, further complicates the term in relation to internet, suggesting: "Culture has lost its boundary" (2). Internet distinguishes itself from traditional media by enabling "many-to-many communications", "simultaneous reception", eliminating or at least blurring geographical communication borders, immediate worldwide contact, and positioning the "modern/late subject" into a networked information environment, contributing to the blurring of the boundaries surrounding what was once "a safe ground of inquiry" (Poster 2, 16). Questions regarding the archiving and manipulation of (digital) cultural objects reflect the resulting problems (Fisher 111-132). Another approach targets our identity and, according to Stratton, includes topics such as global (homogeneous) cultures, and feminism as suggested by Haraway, or, according to Hayles, our postmodern identity. Finally, ideas about culture and what it means to us, our digital environment, and formerly non-existent attitudes are also questioned on several accounts (De Souza e Silva, Benkler). These questions are connected by the notion that internet and digitisation scatters, decentralises, and reorganises how and what we know.

One new dimension of digital culture is its decontextualisation, leaving identities and cultural objects "vocal inflections" or bodies while it is "the gradual process of adaptation to the semiotic universe of free-floating electronic alibis that constitutes the unique culture of the Internet" (Porter xii). To suggest that internet culture is inherently different from culture 'outside' the internet, is a radical stance that ignores ideas of a hybrid space as suggested by

1 Digital culture here will be interchangeably be used with internet culture because internet is not a restricted to computer use (for example mobile devices), while digitisation allows for the production of some forms of discourse (such as memes and visual messages) that are not depended on internet for its creation but are dependent on internet for its distribution.

De Souza e Silva and which attacks the idea that "We cannot make new culture ex nihilo" (Benkler 300). A more productive notion comes from Curtin who suggests that a medium has the capacity to "organize and reorganize popular perceptions of difference," so that increasingly "one's place is not so much a matter of authentic location or rootedness but one's relationship to economic, political, technological, and cultural flows" (qtd. in Gitelman 17). This positions culture as a process instead of an object allowing the notion that some *aspects* are new, adding newness to something that already exists. The reorganisation of culture also reorganises our relationships with political and cultural flows, thus instigating new perspectives.

Positivistic perspectives of what internet has made possible come from Jenkins and Lévy. New media and fandom scholar Jenkins is clear in his ideas on how media transforms culture: "(...) convergence represents a cultural shift" while people use new media to participate according to 'a new set of rules that none of us fully understands' (ibid.). This is justification of our inability to come to a single understanding of digital culture. But it also mystifies meaning and obliterates inquiry into the cultural shift and further, automates assumptions about digital culture. For example, Jenkins believes collective intelligence forms a mediated power that 'soon allows us' to use this shift for "more serious purposes" (ibid. 4). A more cautious approach is taken by Lévy, author of *Cyberculture*, who claims we judge technology to be "good or bad" yet he argues we should "recognise the qualitative changes in the ecology of signs, the unfamiliar environment that results from the extension of new communication networks throughout social and cultural life" (x). This suggests digital culture allows radical and intrinsic changes in culture while potentially creating something 'bigger and better'. Though failures and abuse are addressed by both authors, a critical approach has not necessarily been taken to demystify the processes Jenkins describes or the grand potentiality Lévy indicates.

Kiesler in *Culture of the Internet*, rightly concludes that "The Internet lives in imagination more than in reality" (ix). Ahead of the perspectives of Jenkins and Lévy, Kiesler already tried to understand the changes that the "symbolic force" of the internet has brought along, while giving meaning to the social patterns of behaviour internet in the late 90's was displaying. She correctly contextualises the development of internet culture in a "fast-moving, ideological sensitive and economically important domain" (ibid. xiv). Instead of digital culture as a mass movement, the complexity, pervasiveness and scattered nature are admitted to complicate an understanding of cultural movements. Robins and Webster in *Times of Technoculture*, summarise the development of internet technology by stating that:

"The overall shift, over the last twenty years or so, has been from a political economic to a cultural perspective. (...) The technocultural project, as it is concerned with information and communications technologies, now embraces a very broad range of issues—from economic policy to virtual popular culture—and consequently mobilises a variety of discourses." (3).

Both at an instrumental and transformative level, internet creates new and transforms existing culture and its elements. For example, competitive terms for the same action, like 'pirating' or 'sharing' for downloading uploaded (copyrighted) content as an alternative to sharing via video- or audio tapes, imply that technologies support new instrumentality as well as new attitudes. Questions that remain unanswered are how digital culture is related to

decision-making specifically. Can digital culture contribute to deliberation and decision-making processes and if so, to what extent?

The role of public opinion expressed through in digital culture in decision-making

Culture and public opinion are closely related. Berger suggests that public opinion steers changes in culture (3-9). Additionally, “pop culture tends to reflect prevailing public attitudes,” and that popular culture in relation to public opinion is “one of the best teachers invented” (Asimov & Mader 54-55). If the public opinion is an informative and deliberative process as suggested in the introduction of this thesis, then popular culture should be able to provide insight in regards to public opinion. For public opinion produced in the online public sphere to count as a political entity that can exert influence on decision-making, the values represented in digital culture must be considered. In other words, deliberation in the public sphere should also consider the more accessible forms of deliberation, those of popular and common cultures (Macnamara 160-174). There are several notions that must be discussed before researching the exact contribution of digital culture. One must consider first the place of public opinion in the digital public sphere as well as in the deliberative and decision-making processes, and secondly, the barrier existing between digital culture and the official political system.

In consideration of politics in the digital public sphere, Macnamara wonders, “what constitutes political discussion?”. Benkler suggests the formation of the public sphere varies amongst democratic theories: “In deliberative concepts, this might make requirements of the form of discourse” (184-185). The public opinion has to be formed into “positions amenable for consideration and adoption into the form political sphere” (ibid.). This excludes popular culture as described by Jenkins: fan fiction, home-made video's, some blogs, etcetera. Yet Williams' idea is that such expressions help to “rebel against hegemonic structures” and “strongly identify one's position,” which means a substantial amount of information can be gained from such expressions. Macnamara suggests that “spoofs, parodies and even abuse are a legitimate part of the public sphere”, while “so-called independent public opinion polls”, are “often paid for by one of the major political parties” (169). This means that in some case opinions presented in popular discourses are less credible and leading than official media outlets despite being more genuine. Digital products and their tendency for “corruption and misuse” raises the questions of whether digital culture improves the online public sphere or deteriorates it, though it remains part of the online discourse either way. If digital culture is part of the deliberative online public sphere, it has the potential to exert political influence.

But this potential is stifled due to the varying natures of popular culture and the “serious” nature of politics. Castells recognises a general crisis of political engagement which is due in part to the amount and quality of political insight our digital environment provides us with (156, 184-185). Since content in Castells' example is considered equally true and untrue, the resulting apathetic attitude may render one cynical about everything. If corresponding goals exist, one should acknowledge the generally accepted notion that politicians play a political game. Political engagement is based on strategy and pragmatics instead of principles and moral sentiments. Though an increase in political engagement online is acknowledged, governments trying to constitute a digital bond between themselves and citizens often fail to

do so (Grossklags Appel & Bridges, Dean 31). Some of these initiatives aim to take into account the considerations of what drives people, but more frequently consist of the instrumental digital repackaging of processes. Expressions in digital culture as a reaction to this are recognised, yet this role mostly means reflecting or echoing the public opinion rather than changing decision-making through deliberation (Cogan & Kelso xi). Even if popular digital culture has different roles such as “allusive,” “disruptive,” or “responsive” as suggested by Gournelos, some conclude that despite of the existence of digital deliberation, it holds no power (Valovich 127). Part of the cause of this lies in the disconnection between digital discourse and the government.

This is the second issue that needs to be addressed. The original public sphere “is body of individuals which remains outside of the official government but acts as a controlling force upon the powers of the state” (Mided 63). The digital public sphere has trouble fulfilling this role, however, since “Internet cannot converge with the state because its architecture denies the structure of the state” (ibid.). This indicates two notions; first, that the state will never experience any control resulting from the digital public sphere, and second, that to control the government, the convergence of the digital public sphere and the state is not obligatory. Benkler in this context wonders, “how, ultimately, is such a political and public opinion converted into state action?” (180). The idea that state action can result from the digital public sphere is idealised and, while the internet is praised for its decentralised nature, some form of organisation or centralisation has to take place before any influence on decision-making can be realised.

In conclusion, digital culture can function as a public opinion that puts forwards opposing ideas and has a place in the digital public sphere. One overarching question remains, however, which asks to what extent digital culture is considered deliberative in the sense that it contributes to decision-making? How does it exert control and what shape does this take? The tendency to answer this question on a pragmatic level is compelling, but the analysis of successful cases sheds light on what is required for popular digital culture to play a significant role in decision-making. Such cases are too dependent on circumstances and specificities. On a theoretical level such information does not provide insight into what digital culture can provide structurally. As digital culture is part of the public sphere, Benkler's identification of structural requirements for the digital public sphere will be used in the next section to describe in what way digital culture contributes to decision-making.

Digital Culture: its role in deliberation and decision-making

As shown above, digital culture has a place in the public sphere and functions as a way to put forward opposing ideas in the existing discourse. Yet the question remains in what way it is capable of controlling the decision-making process. Recalling the previous findings, constructions aiding the convergence of public opinion with deliberative, representative, and consensus-based decision making are complex and practically implausible as confirmed by Mided (63). Attempts to steer deliberation according to official political structures have largely proven unsuccessful, which supports the idea that the only option for digital culture is to remain detached from official decision-making bodies (Grossklags Appel & Bridges, Dean 31). This means that if digital culture has something to offer decision making it should

do so in its own body of deliberation,” in which digital culture is the carrier of the public opinion. To investigate whether digital culture can constitute its own deliberative process or not, it will be tested against Benkler's five requirements of a digital public sphere.

Benkler's requirements of the chosen digital cultural objects

In Benkler's discussion on “Design characteristics of a communications platform” in which he centralises Habermas' idealised public sphere as a starting point, his main aim is to answer the question: “How is private opinion communicated to others in a form and in channels that allow it to be converted into a public, political opinion, and a position worthy of political concern by the formal structures of governance of a society?” (180). This question is important for two reasons: first, it acknowledges that digital deliberation should not be part of the formal political system, which ensures the analysis remains in line with the conclusions above; second, this research question shows to what extent digital culture is a meaningful carrier of the public opinion and how it relates to the political playing field, which is exemplified in the following investigation.

The five requirements that provide contribution of the public sphere include: first, that of a “universal intake,” meaning all topics suggested by “all those governed by that system are equally respected as potential proper subjects for government action”; second, “filtering for potential political relevance”, meaning that a public sphere itself must decide what topics are suitable for political review; third, “filtering for accreditation,” meaning that instead of identifying topics, topics are judged on their political credibility; fourth, “independence from government control,” meaning the public sphere in which deliberation takes place must not be controlled by the government, though the government might contribute to the discussion (Benkler 180-185). Finally, the fifth requirement, “synthesis of public opinion,” as reviewed in the previous part in the discussion, concerns what counts as a public sphere (ibid.). The following four demands will work to answer the question of how digital culture captured in memes, hacktivism, and political online discussions is meaningful to deliberation in the public sphere, and what potential it has to influence decision-making.

Memes

The political relevance of memes has been addressed in several accounts, in academia as well as in the media. The Washington Post reports that “Politicians have always looked for a way to express complex messages in as brief and compact a way as possible. During the television era, it was the sound bite. During the Internet era, it is the meme” (Basulto). It is suggested that politicians are not in control of the memes, but can only “seed” the internet with material that allows a meme to be created (ibid.). An example portraying this is with the Barack Obama memes, which are described by Fraser and Dutta as part of an online strategy: “He [Obama] will be the first occupant of the White House to have won a presidential election on the Web” (qtd. in Burns, 79). What lacks is an explanation of the relation between politics, the digital public sphere, and decision-making processes. Why are memes made by users of the online space and not as part of political communications?

The political relevance of a meme created on the user end is questioned by Gosa, who claims memes about politics are only “ostensibly” politically relevant (228). His research does show that specific audiences—in this case black male youth in the U.S.—act upon the relation

between their own identity and political memes (229). The relevance of a meme in this case depends on how much identity and the political person are connected. Political relevance of memes also includes a meme's propagandistic tendency; memes are spread not because they are true but because "they have the power to propagate themselves" (Fiala 16). Fiala claims that "Cultural ideas tend to succeed when they satisfy our cognitive, emotional and social needs. Success is defined by persistence over time and not by truth." (ibid.).

Another explanation for the relation between the (popular) public sphere and politics that memes embody, is the idea that "memplexes," are complicated and interrelated sets of knowledge which are configured by our brains as easy to comprehend and simplified understandings, which contributes to the simple diffusion of memes. (Blackmore 41, 143, 170). Brodie's idea that politicians are 'bombarded' by memes carrying voter beliefs, in combination with Blackmore's notion of a meme as a 'shortcut' to certain ideas, supports a scenario where citizens can more easily connect with decision-makers (174). Brodie claims that politicians pick up on memes by "reading, listening to others, and perhaps from offhand conversation in social circles", though it is unlikely legislators personally search the web for interesting memes to discuss (ibid.). Despite the relevance of memes for political decision making and legislators, it remains the question to what extent memes contribute to decision making and the public sphere. In order to apply Benkler's requirements, it is necessary to first understand what a meme is.

A meme is "an idea, belief or belief system, or pattern of behavior that spreads throughout a culture either vertically by cultural inheritance (as by parents to children) or horizontally by cultural acquisition (as by peers, information media, and entertainment media)" ('Emme'). Memes in internet culture thrive on this principle and are spread through blogs, websites, and social networks. and They generally have some sort of entertainment value, but can also have a more serious meaning. Memes often start as a joke or comment about a specific topic in the form of a picture, text, or a combination of the two. The texts are generally short and evolve around a single or few images which can be 'hand-made' (by use of drawing software for example) or pre-made (a photograph for example). If a meme gains traction, it can be picked up in a couple of ways. The same meme can be extended by adding another line of comment or picture to the same meme. This can lead to extended 'meme-conversations', where an extended meme is the result, or where the literal picture or text is used over and over again with a different pun. Memes can also be reproduced as a topic, meaning the same joke is expressed by a different meme where text and images are replaced but the topic remains the same.

Memes are used to create meaning and understanding about a topic. Benkler argues that "culture, shared meaning, and symbols are how we construct our views of life across a wide range of domains – personal, political, and social" (Benkler 274). Some views are more radical, suggesting memes are the foundation of our culture (Burns 78). Memes are not necessarily near the foundation of our culture, but they are important vehicles of opinions. An important political meme was the reproduction of the Barack Obama posters which were either copied visually or with different images set to the associated slogan, "Yes We Can!" (ibid. 79). This meme demonstrated how political content and the accompanying discourse are part of digital culture. Memes make politics more fun and easier to engage with, though they are relatively shallow, lacking a well-developed background of the opinion they put forward. Knobel and Lanckshear claim that "the meme's staying power, in part, has to do

with their relationship to people's interests in political critique, advocacy and citizenship” (qtd. in Heron-Hruby & Alvermann 219). Analysing these memes provides insight into the public opinion and the meaning people give to specific (political) topics.

The last requirement of a public sphere, that of government independence, is easily achieved by the public sphere if memes play a major role. First, it should be noted that there are still ways for governments to intervene with its independence. Indirect control by manipulating Internet Service Providers or blocking websites, as is done in China for example, can still wreck the independence of memes (Abbott 99-144). In most Western democracies, the governments’ interest in memes and their potential political charge is unlikely to trigger relevant events. Alternatively, memes can be considered government-independent, a notion that must consider the other three requirements.

Memes are not successful considering the requirement of universal intake. Most memes are judged on their entertainment value and, although memes make it easier to engage with politics, they are not valued based on their potential for government action. An equitable consideration of memes is difficult since they are subject to a range of audiences with differing size and composition. Governments hardly consider memes relevant to their business, unless there is a direct connection as in the case of the Obama meme. There is no record that explicitly captures or investigates the attention governments allocate to identifying potential, politically-interesting 'meme-conversations'. Since memes exist across platforms and often rely on their viral contagion for success, a single system by which memes would be governed can be considered non-existent. Without a single, clear criterion to consider and compare memes equally as potential subject for government action, it becomes difficult to create meaning and enable understanding.

Determining a meme’s political relevance is simpler. Although groups mostly do not decide consciously or on predetermined conditions that a meme is politically relevant, the fact that some political topics become memes shows their political relevance to the audience. This is a two-way development; if a political topic is interesting and widely recognised, it might be worth a meme since there are enough people who will understand it. On the other hand, the more people talk about the meme, the more popular/public? recognition a political topic will develop. If the idea of the meme appeals to public opinion, an increase in viral contagion is expected, as was the case in the Obama memes. Although the topic is not necessarily important enough to set a political agenda, it is important enough to be considered by the community. This also reflects the difference between filtering for review and filtering for accreditation. Though its potential for review is partially reflected in a meme's success, its low potential to reach the political agenda means most topics are not politically credible. The topics that are politically credible, however, are likely to be put on the agenda in another way, such as through other paths than a meme. This shows the difference between what is important for the public and what is important for the polity.

Hacktivism

The relevance of hacktivism for political decision-making is complicated since it varies in shape and perception by those affected by it. In trying to understand the relation between hacktivism and politics, different parties offer different insights. The Huffington Post reports on the arrest of hackers group LulzSec and their actions, claims that the attention created by

hacktivists outweighs the damage they create (Crump). According to PBS News Hour Transparency Camp, hacktivism is “an open forum for participants to drive solutions, share experiences and collaborate on furthering the goal of open government.” This clearly shows that hacktivists are interested in political engagement (Ganesan & Bruns). This openness is often seen as one of the major ways to create political influence by disclosing data: “(...) transparency activist Marko Rakar, of Croatia's data publishing organization Windmill, wondered aloud whether a government could control its citizens solely by withholding data and information from them. ‘Suddenly,’ he said, “[the government's] competence for judgment can be questioned.” [sic]” (ibid.). By disclosing data, people can express an/have access to opinions about and insights on government decision making, which provides a basis for their judgement. Additionally, disclosing such information channels power to some extent from the government to the people.

Taylor and Jordan notice a discrepancy between the ideal of channelling power and actual illegal actions that hacktivists undertake, and describe a desire to “hack” and to make “technology more democratic” (13). Taylor and Jordan conclude that the hacker's political agenda and their practical skills both engage and dissociate hacktivists from politics and society (ibid.). In the end, hacktivists can have politically relevant roles in decision making and the public sphere. Shane claims that the spread of technological tools aims to “take the decision to monitor or regulate speech out of the hands of the state,” while “individuals create their own speech regimes” (139). Not only are there reasons to assume political relevance through the spread of tools and the existence of a political agenda, Houghton suggests that hacktivists “use the lack of physicality in online life to amplify a political message” (220). This means that the nature of hacktivism plays a major role in its importance for the digital public sphere and political decision making.

Hacktivism as activity has been described as “theft and distribution”, “software development”, “site parodies”, “site defacements” “site redirects”, “information theft”, “virtual sabotage” and “performative hacktivism”, which tends to put forth “carnavalesque protest actions” (Samuel 129). Hacktivism is a way to directly intervene in existing information structures and has been researched from different perspectives. Sociologists Jordan and Taylor explain hacktivism as a means to access tools for political action while groups of people self organise digitally. Further, hacktivism can be seen as digital “grassroots political protest” (1). Hacktivism is something that belongs to the people. It is popular political action rather than institutionalised political action and it harbours critique, an oppositional activity in the digital realm. Hacktivism is also seen as “civil disobedience” and “direct action” while hacktivists are attributed with computer skills and a sense of “tactics, purpose and efficacy of political protest” (Lowes 113). Hacktivism is more organised than memes, and so are the counter actions from governments and corporations. This indicates that hacktivism potentially yields more influence over the political agenda and discourse. It is not a mere expression but a possible threat to the safety of opponents’ networks and information.

A more nuanced approach distinguishes between a deconstructivist interpretation and a constructivist interpretation (Von Busch & Palmås 19). The constructivist notion suggests that “(...) the challenge for activists, artists and designers lies in how to create well-functioning self-organised structures (self-consistent aggregates) which can replace the previous structures.” (ibid. 19.). If hacktivism aims to replace a deficit system with another

structure, it must be based on a strategic approach as well as a conviction of what this change should bring about.

Samuel claims hacktivists are driven by a “cyberlibertarian ideology” that assigns personal digital rights as politically, the most valuable achievement (ibid. 131). Hacktivism is a hacker group that claims that their efforts aid social justice wherever democracy is at stake (Robbins). On its website, Hacktivism advises governments, large corporations, and anyone with an interest in security to download Goolag for example, a piece of software that checks website security (Ruffin). Assuming Hacktivism's intentions are sincere, hacktivism can potentially aid governments, contributing to an official political body from another body of political engagement through digital means.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with a cyberlibertarian view does not expedite that Hacktivism outside of official political institutional structures, operates on the political premise of carrying out a view, representing a group of individuals, and acting as an organised institution that operates based on certain values and convictions (ICCPR, HESSLA). Another group that receives more attention in media discourse is Anonymous (The New York Times, Information Week). There exists much discussion about Anonymous' intentions and whether they represent political protest or criminal behaviour, yet most agree on the amplification of their actions through the internet (The New York Times). If the relation between politics, activism, the digital environment, and tools is seen as an amplifier, does this mean Hacktivism's and Anonymous' actions can be amplified to the extent they play a role in deliberation?

Based on universal intake, hacktivism has a special relation with the government, strongly relating to the requirement of government independence. Since their actions are not exclusively political or criminal, hacktivism has the potential to evoke support as well as counter actions from the government. This relationship is complex. On the one hand there is a need for cooperation as governments reward hackers for testing the safety of a government's infrastructure, while on the other hand, hacktivists are faced with arrests and persecution (ANP, Security.nl). The leitmotiv in such concessions is based on improving a government's digital security. Other topics such as the credit card attacks protesting the allegedly wrongly arrested Julian Assange, or attacks protesting the prevention of file-sharing, have not so positively been received (BBC News). This means the topics 'suggested' by hacktivism are not equally considered since they are judged on the usefulness or threat to governments. Attacks targeting the money flow of Visa and MasterCard are considered attacks against a person, company, or institute, rather than a protest against specific events or principles. This means the nature of the action is changed from 'protest' to 'attack' making equal consideration impossible. Hacktivism is both dependent on the government and independent from the government for achieving its goals and proposing topics as matters for deliberation.

The notion That both filtering for political relevance and filtering for accreditation are successful might seem contrary. If the attacks are newsworthy, the media might instigate some form of discussion. Governments can be interrogated about their failing digital conduct, or hacktivists are positioned as 'the attackers'. This means hacktivists are, to some degree, in charge of their own political relevance. They have the option to perform

newsworthy actions to be put on the political agenda. Though also they have the capacity to create political relevance by strategically organising their actions; they remain dependent on other news outlets for how much publicity they receive. Some attacks are bound to be noticed, but governments can also strategically position discussions concerning attacks in a way most beneficial to them. Although according to some the term “cyber war” is exaggerated in the context of hacktivism, a “war” can be witnessed in who occupies the deliberative space and who takes what place in discussion (Shiels).

Hacktivism is engaged politically and is an influential player in the discussion on what principles should be applied to the web. The relatively small organisation of core contributors depends on the digital spread of their tools and on the media discourse to create awareness about their goals. Alas, the lack of participation as a recognisable public entity is detrimental to the public visibility of hacktivism, and therefore often lacks the force to structurally influence decision making and policy design. Additionally, though some actions instigate discussion and deliberation about what should be done, the largest part of this discussion entails actions against hacktivist groups and their potential threat against governments. Without a broad support of the principles that hacktivism promotes – the support that can instigate change and demonstrate the importance of promoted ideas – structural change is unlikely.

Reddit

The notion that online forums are meaningful in politics is hardly denied, yet whether the relation between the two is positive or negative remains in debate. Bimber suggests that digital media support the deterioration of civic engagement while increasing a variety of contradicting views (qtd. in Chadwick 238). Political views not previously discernible might now have larger chances of gaining traction, and making forums very relevant for them. Yet Bimber also recognises a less positive side to online technologies, claiming they may “deinstitutionalize politics, fragment communication, and accelerate the pace of the public agenda and decision making,” thereby undermining the unity of the public sphere (ibid). The notion that the public agenda and political decision making have come closer to one another is true to some extent. For example, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) has gained major traction through the political section of the web forum Reddit, after a Reddit user suggested to create an “Internet Freedom Association” (Patterson). The EFF aims to promote internet freedom while raising its first “\$7,500 from over 200 separate donations” in the first 24 hours after it had been suggested on Reddit (ibid.). The EFF has been active lobbying online against the Cyber Intelligence Sharing & Protection Act (CISPA) , using a Twitter-hashtag campaign called #CongressTMI (Walton).

Positive contributions to political engagement, such as deliberation and political influence, through forums are acknowledged by Buth (46). She describes the possibility of gaining insight into the opinions and beliefs of citizens at the moment when debates amongst citizens increase, while additionally, people believe their contribution had a beneficial influence (ibid.). Hindman on the other hand correctly points out that even though such notions might ring true to some extent, the political relevance of some forums is decreased by a lack of “eyeballs”, when “formal and informal barriers hinder” direct contact between politicians and citizens. She argues that forums serve best in strengthening “the watchdog

function” (18). Put differently, audiences can watch from the sidelines but will never be able to adjust political decision-making to their own views.

These opposing notions can be explained by looking at the 'success factors' of political forums. Kies and Remenyi, researchers in political and economical sciences, in researching the Italian political forum Radicali.it, extracted three requirements for its success: first, openness and a lack of censorship; second, participation of and commenting by key contributors so users know their comments will be evaluated; and third, “personal links” between members both on- and offline (qtd. in Remenyi 242). To further deepen the idea of 'success factors' to answer the question of how forums create political relevance through online deliberation, Reddit is an interesting example to explore. Meeting all three requirements, Reddit adds to the ideal of political influence through digital deliberation by providing concrete actions organised by members (as in the case of EFF). Not only do users create political relevance, but politicians are also known to contribute or take an interest in and act upon Reddit's deliberations. In order to acknowledge to what extent Reddit embodies the 'digital deliberative ideal', Benkler's requirements are now addressed.

Reddit.com is an online discussions-board featuring those which specifically target politics. It is characterised by its highly deliberative nature. Members contribute by providing information and opinions about political views: “(...) Lessig offers up some damn interesting strategies while acknowledging that it will be an incredibly difficult fight that relies not on politicians, but on citizens to challenge the status quo.” ('actlikehumans'). Others propose practical steps such as drafting outlines stating the participators' views which then, through personal connections, can be offered to legislators ('alphawimp731'). This particular topic accumulated 175 responses within half a day, some of which offered suggestions of what to put in a counter-acting bill. Reddit exemplifies a set of communities, blogs, websites or other online entities with the potential to create political engagement. This means that such communities are “willing to influence the functions of the political system”, and with the “articulation and aggregation of interests, political support, but also political socialization and recruiting of political personnel” which is important in order to influence the political system (In Der Smitten 34).

Filtering for political relevance on Reddit is simple: if a member has a contribution that is expected to be politically relevant it is posted in the “Politics” thread of Reddit, and if the content does adhere to the guidelines provided by moderators, the topic will (automatically) be removed. Universal intake is more difficult because Reddit does not consider all topics equal, failing to live up to the requirement of universal intake. The topics suggested are generally in disagreement with conservative ideas, as topics of a more liberal nature are preferred by the audience. However, discussions consider varying opinions equally. The selection of topics are to be discussed is based on their relevance in a politically liberal perspective, but the deliberation on what is right or wrong, or what actions should be considered, reflects a more varied body of thoughts. This double edge means filtering political relevance can only be partly successful because only a percentage of political topics available (those of a more liberal nature) are considered relevant. the deliberative sphere is very much alive, though, despite this general tendency to barricade the equal consideration of all political convictions.

The political credibility of the topics is generally considered high because of the guidelines.

These include to separate between generally insulting comments or contradictions with one's own beliefs, change the titles of submitted links, "Use "BREAKING" in your titles" and more guidelines which are to ensure the political credibility and contents of the posts made (Reddit). Many posts include links to articles whose titles may not be edited in order to remain as authentic as possible. Keeping the sources intact emphasizes their genuine origin, aiming to create political credibility. Similar rules apply to the use of images or the word "Breaking", which would benefit an article's importance at the expense of other articles by advertising uniqueness rather than the relevance of the content (ibid.). The moderators aim to keep the credibility of the thread in check and therefore control the quality of the discourse taking place.

Thread credibility is also enhanced by the contribution of government members and the online actions organised that support them. Reddit is independent from government control but it does not mean the two do not influence each other. This influence is demonstrated by a group of protesters in opposition of the SOPA/PIPA bill which would censor and control online activities, aiding major entrainment corporations and organisations such as the Motion Picture Association of America. The group "calling themselves 'Operation Pull Ryan', [is] a non-partisan coalition with the intent of protecting internet-based free speech from legislations such as SOPA, PIPA, and the 2012 iteration of the NDAA," organises themselves through Reddit (Pullryan). Reddit protesters raised \$15,000 within 48 hours to support Ryan's opponent Rob Zerban, as Paul Ryan was financially backed to vote in favour of the bill (Franzen).

This is an interesting development for two reasons. Firstly, political action can apparently be instigated in mainly discursive environments; control is seized and a rudimentary capable organisation forms alongside the government. Secondly, the idea that this organisation should stand by the government because internet and the political framework do not correspond is undermined due to the participation of a few political members on Reddit audience. Whether this development is good or not partially depends on the degree of independence the organisation has. It should be noted however that this was a relatively small action, helped by the fact that there were only a few politicians directly involved, rather than an entire political system. Nevertheless the control over decision making based on deliberative practices shifts from a potential to a reality.

Concluding

Returning to the question of what role digital culture has in deliberative decision making which is currently obstructed by neoliberalism, several conclusions can be drawn. Digital culture cannot be said to confront the problems of neoliberalism head on, except in some cases of hacktivism aimed against the support of neoliberal principles, held by some major corporations or governments. These principles strive to reach a neoliberal ideal or one of the following aforementioned principles. These hacktivist actions are too loosely connected in order to counter the problems structurally, and are seen as actions against persons or companies instead of actions against certain principles. In terms of the requirements for deliberation and the role of culture in neoliberalism as Hayek defined it, there are some other conclusions that can be drawn. The deliberative decision-making process demands that citizens organise and negotiate with themselves their beliefs about political views and actions. In this sense, digital culture can be seen as an instigator of this process. Therefore, it is evident that digital culture functions on three dimensions of deliberation: memes, hacktivism, and discussion boards.

Memes increase accessibility by circumventing the demands that a politically engaged citizen should otherwise abide by. Participation in a meme enables one to share their opinion whilst positioning themselves in relation to a specific idea or topic. Though this might not require a deep understanding of the matter in discussion, and the sharing or discussing might only take place for entertainment, one is willing to identify themselves in support or opposition to a political topic. In this process, the role of culture is appointing a political identity.

Hacktivism increases awareness in several discourses and though its actions can also evoke counteractions, it connects several layers of political engagement. Discussions about hacktivism or its actions penetrate the media discourse, the political agenda, and to a less measurable extent the 'civilian' discourse. This makes it an important political player, yet the danger is if it becomes too powerful without the required support, serious actions might be organised to erase or further counter hacktivist parties.

Reddit increases action in relation to political conviction. It can be said to be the carrier of high quality deliberation consisting of discussion, a valuation of opinions, and opinions that are based on knowledge of the political discourse. Deliberation, both as requirement of a decision-making process and the discussion of norms, takes place here. The presence of deliberation might explain the participation of both civil and political actors as deliberation creates insight into how these two groups should go about achieving their corresponding goals and why they should do so. Such actions show that the political discourse and 'civilian' discourse can be closer connected than they currently are in most cases.

In terms of actually influencing decision making, it is alarming to note the outline of a type of influence that can only be constituted by positioning oneself directly against governments. Hacktivism might not be deliberative in nature, but it is one form of digital culture that is most likely to be put on the political agenda by posing a threat. On the one hand, this shows that influence by counter-actions is possible, but on the other, it concludes that in order to exert influence one has to oppose the current political decision, making discussion and

cooperation non-influential alternatives. While influence is possible, it cannot be made in the form of a contribution. Memes, however informative they can be for harvesting the public opinion in regards to specific topics, exert no influence. Reddit enables high quality deliberation but, despite its reflective and knowledgeable nature, is hardly contributing to political decision making structurally. Yet the sporadic actions are constitutive rather than destructive as is often the case with hacktivism, and the discussions are very insightful for and can potentially aid political agenda-setting.

More generally this conclusion indicates that the limitation of the digital public sphere's potential lies mainly in either its 'unprofessional' or destructive nature. Additionally, interesting discussions towards political agenda setting are ignored, indicating that there are too few or weak connections between the political system and the public discourse. Even when a topic in digital public discourse is already on the political agenda, considerations from the digital discourse receive hardly any attention. Yet, even though a body of deliberation exists that can provide politicians with feedback, the connection required seems non-existent. Much could be gained here if the demand for a (group of) representative(s) of the digital public sphere existed, as Malcolm suggested. These representatives as a link between deliberation and the political institution, would also aid the requirements such as political credibility, Benkler put forward, ensuring that, regardless of whether all users contribute to decision making equally or directly, there are at least attempts to equally and more directly represent the public opinion in decision-making processes. This would provide people with a sense of being acknowledged instead of voting in routine elections to provide their governments with a *carte blanche*.

In order to establish such a connection, governments must stop favouring neoliberal principles through reflective practices, and sacrificing those principles which are thought to be more important than those considered neoliberal. Unfortunately, a government receiving a *carte blanche* with every election cycle has little incentive to do so. This raises the requirements for political systems to put forward more prominently and rely more heavily on digital deliberation than what currently is the case. Digital culture plays an important role in this system because it educates the government.

The original idea put forward by Hayek, that culture had to educate people to ensure their civilian and political duties, has shifted to a scenario where digital culture is capable of educating the political deliberative decision-making process. The notion that all citizens ought to be engaged or educated to the extent that they can contribute to political deliberation is too idealistic. It is possible, however, to include persons engaged and educated enough in the political deliberation process, in addition to the political parties present. Such parties have trouble embracing digital methods of connecting to the public and often use digital tools to pursue their own goals. This does not mean political actors do not contribute in an effective way to decision making, but they pursue goals other than those of digital cultural expressions of political deliberation. The latter aims to create an understanding, an identity, method, or opinion of decisions to be made, rather than to navigate their way through the political decision-making body. In this sense, digital culture harbours the tenable political convictions that political parties should strive to attend to and succeed in and through their decision-making process.

Before concluding that digital culture can successfully contribute to deliberative decision making, the structure of a connection between the political and digital discourse must be researched further. Although based on this research, non-political representation allows for some contribution, it is insufficient to conclude that this option is attainable, or that perhaps other connections between the two discourses have more to offer. Additionally, more clarity should be obtained as to how the fields of politics and digital culture remain separate. This separation is both a strength and an obstacle for Benkler's independent digital public sphere. In order to benefit from identifying tenable political convictions that political parties should strive for, while also keeping it separated from official political bodies, more understanding of this separation is necessary. To infer that actions such as Reddit's 'Pull Ryan' are successful in terms of size and structure, regardless of conditions, is dangerous since structure implies attending to a myriad of problems instead of just one.

Unanswered questions that need to be answered are if include whether or not digital culture is suited merely for agenda-setting, and if so, whether it need be self-constituting or require a more controlled approach in order to enhance agenda setting? Based on the limited selection of digital cultural practices (memes, hacktivism, and discussion-boards), it is reasonable to wonder if more potentially rewarding practices exist that can either counter the problems created by the neoliberal discourse or add to the deliberative decision-making processes. Also, attention must be paid to the governing body behind these cultural practices in order to see if digital culture can be really considered as an influencer of agenda setting. At large, it is only when the network through which political deliberation and decision making passes, aligns with the network of politically relevant digital content, that one can see whether the potential of digital culture extends beyond carrying public opinion to exerting influence on political decision-making processes.

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