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Editorial, International Journal of Electronic Governance, 2011

Guest Editors: P. Iosifidis and M. Meimaris

There has been a widespread discussion as to the civic potential of online media and social networks, their contribution to democracy, public sphere and civic cultures, citizen responsibility and participation. This discussion has typically been conducted with a degree of optimism as evidenced by Barack Obama's online campaign to activism on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and is backed up with renewed online political participation in mass protests currently taking place in the Arab world, demonstrations in Portugal, Ireland and Greece over EU tough fiscal measures, protests in the UK against the rise of the University tuition fees. The net generation, growing up with the internet and other online media, is widely assumed to consist of more responsible citizens, using their technological expertise to campaign on social and political issues, exercise closer scrutiny over their governments, genuinely being more politically engaged. The combined effect of new technology is set to deepen democratic trends and address the 'democracy failure' or 'democratic deficit' (citizen inequality, political apathy) by strengthening the spirit of solidarity (necessary for citizenship affected by market selfishness) and providing people with access to power-scrutinizing mechanisms. Citizens of the so-called 'virtual democracy', 'electronic agora' or 'blogosphere' are said to fulfil the dream of a unified and interconnected world.

The new online technologies can certainly contribute to civic engagement by providing access to discussion forums, enhancing deliberation and empowering individuals. The unprecedented expansion of Online Social Networks such as *Facebook, MySpace*, *LinkedIn* and *Twitter* offers vast opportunities for communication, entertainment, deliberation and discussion. These online forums differ from traditional media, such as Public Service Media, in that they allow more *interactivity* and *many-to-many communication*. But they have some similarities to Habermas' traditional concept of the public sphere: net spheres are public places that are outside of control by the state; they allow individuals to exchange views and knowledge as well as critical points of view; they are spaces where public-minded rational consensus can be developed. At the same time, cyber-media are not confined to frequency bandwidth; any one can be a 'publisher' (ability to voice one's opinion; collective action); they provide *access* (to all with internet account); they are *self-generating social networks*, allowing networks to form from participation, rather than structuring relationships from the top.

Meanwhile there are dimmer scenarios emanating from the academia and some industry cycles for overestimating the impact of the new media. Academics often question the difference the social networks can make in a neo-liberal globalized world characterized by private citizenship. Critical scholars assert that the technological potential is framed by contextual issues and civic tendencies should be placed in socio-cultural contexts. Instead of empowering people the new technologies can turn to be restrictive. Cyber-media may not be spaces where public-minded rational consensus can be developed. The net can turn to be a *noisy, uncontrolled environment;* the open participation may turn chaotic, so there can be no model rules of behaviour or structured conversation; texts and voices may result in anarchic, rather than democratic forms of participation. What is more, there are linguistic barriers and blogging sites are typically dominated by white male voices and polarized opinion. The very notion of openness is at stake as there is limited competition among providers. Inclusiveness can be an issue too – not all people use the Net due to cost considerations or lack of skills, especially in the developing world. Most crucially, critical discussion – the very notion of the

traditional Habermasian public sphere – is often absent on the Net, whose content is highly partisan.

This double issue of the *International Journal of Electronic Governance* revisit the theme of the civic potential of online media to re(create) a public sphere, revamp civic engagement and enhance democracy. The scholars in this volume critically discuss the contemporary relevance of online media and social networks as a cultural and political enterprise and as a public sphere in which a variety of political and socio-cultural demands can be met. The idea of a special issue was born when I was finishing my article, *The Public Sphere, Social Networks and Public Service Media* which discussed the democratizing and empowering functions of the Internet and the new social media and contrasted this with the hypothesis that open-platform Public Service Media are capable of developing more comprehensive and inclusive social frameworks. Already then I had a strong sense that further research on the subject must be carried out more systematically and on a broader scale. I am grateful to the editors of the journal for accepting my idea and allowing space to host a number of related articles. Special thanks go to the renowned scholars who provided the introductory papers that helped to set the scene. My gratitude is due to the authors for submitting full papers, revising them where required following a peer-review process, and for their efforts in meeting a tight schedule.

The ten articles of this special issue particularly pick up the theme of participation and online civic engagement from a number of perspectives: deploy the concept of civic practices and identities in regard to media and citizenship and link them with the notion of power; situate civic tendencies and tensions in socio-cultural context by considering technology as architecture; comparisons of the credibility of Public Service Media with that of Online Social Networks and assessments of the necessity of Public Service Broadcasters' online activities; the shaping of political election campaigns; political attention and climate change activism; the issue of social networks and privacy; government initiatives in the online world; quality of mobilization in e-Participation; the articulation of participation-based local politics and the development of a common space within the European Union. These themes highlight some key concerns relating to the new online media, information inequalities, democracy and citizenship. The range of topics covered in this issue demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the project.

The first two articles by Zizi Papacharissi and Peter Dahlgren are written as introductory pieces in the journal issue with the aim to maintain a rather overarching perspective and yet still put forward concrete ideas. Papacharissi's article *On Convergent Supersurfaces and Public Spheres Online* considers the question of impact of online communication technologies and highlights the complex relationship between technology and democracy. It emphasizes that autonomy and control are affected reflexively, through simultaneous process of liberation and discipline connoted by the architectures of new technologies. The scholar proposes that rather than examining the impact of technology, we consider *technology as architecture*, which would permit to situate civic tendencies in socio-cultural context. She makes a case of moving away from measuring beneficial against diverse civic uses of convergent online technologies and instead concentrating on how newer civic habits, enabled by online networked platforms, shape and are shaped by our civic ecology. What is indeed interesting about this approach is that it does not think of technology as cause and/or

consequence, thus not falling into the self-imposed dichotomy between utopia and dystopia concerning the civil potential of online media; what it does is to consider the political potential of online spaces as part of a greater technologically enabled architecture of civics. Technologies reorganize the balance between public and private spaces, therefore suggesting an architecture upon which everyday activities are occurring.

Peter Dahlgren's piece *Mediated Citizenship: Power, Practices, and Identities* navigates through some key themes with regard to mediated citizenship and the question of power. The article acknowledges the civic affordances of the online media, but it takes a non-technologically determinist approach since it is sceptical as to whether technology itself is enough to result in enhanced citizenship. What the author captures here in fact is a number of issues: that media use is framed by a variety of contextual factors; that the contingencies of mediated citizenship are shaped by power relations; and that civic practices and identities regarding mediated citizenship are linked with the theme of power. Dahlgren is sceptical of politics retreating to personal spheres and in line with Papacharissi's earlier work he argues that the emerging political consciousness is privatized (not collective) as the contemporary citizen adopts a personally devised conception of the political. Dahlgren extends the argument and contends that the continuation of this trend will turn mediated citizenship into an exclusively privatized and virtual citizenship that will require rethinking of our conception of democracy. But the scholar does not present an entirely gloomy scenario, for he asserts that new aspects of civic self can emerge in the online world and novel practices can be engendered, therefore empowering mediated citizenship. Citizens' engagement with the political can be strengthened as power relations become more actualized, visible and contested.

The next eight articles deal with a variety of related issues mainly by using national contexts as case studies. Karen Donders makes a case for public broadcasters to take the lead in enhancing civic involvement by embracing the possibilities to interact and engage with their audiences. The scholar takes the view that social networking sites are typically less inclusive than the multimedia offer of public broadcasters as they lack the enormous archives public channels possess, the trust and the brand names of these broadcasters. Donders focuses on Public Service Broadcaster VRT in Flanders and argues that VRT in conjunction with the Flemish government need to take steps to turn the public broadcaster into Public Service Media, that is, widen its remit to be available in more delivery platforms for producing and distributing public service content. This is in line with many other scholars (see Iosifidis, 2007, 2010; Jakubowicz, 2010; Lowe and Bardoel, 2007; Tambini and Cowling, 2004) that contend cross-platform strategies help Public Service Media retain audience share, reach new audiences and develop on-demand services, while enabling them to create a stronger partnership with civil society and serve an extended form of citizenship.

The three articles that follow deal with: the issue of mobilization in the public sphere; the use of online social media for radical politics; and citizen engagement in public policy. Schossboeck, Parycek and Edelmamm focus on the student protest movement in 2009 in Austria known as *unibrennt* that allowed a new approach of mobilization in e-Participation within the public sphere. The authors acknowledge that bottom-up participation and mobilization do not necessarily result in (re)democratization and a sustainable participation process, yet the case study of *unibrennt* with its extensive media echo allowed for citizen

empowerment and helped to combat the misconception that citizens and especially young people cannot influence public debate. In the same vein, Uldam and Askanius highlight the success of alternative online media and Non-Governmental Organisations such as *Indymedia* in mobilizing large-scale demonstrations around WTO and G8 summits. The authors argue that self-representation enabled by online video networks like YouTube potentially are viewed by activists as facilitating the promotion of protests against turning the 15th United Nations Climate Conference, COP15 into *neo-liberal greenwashing*. In a well-illustrated paper, the scholars stress that the video offer an extended space for action and a set of subject positions with which viewers can identify. In their article, Chung and Chatfield discuss a case study of an Australian state government initiative – an online social network OSN enabled by the advent of Web 2.0 – that offers virtual public spaces to promote citizen engagement with government and community building. The authors have adopted the social capital and social exchange theories to conduct an empirical social network analysis of the structure of the New South Wales government-sponsored Online Social Network and concluded that such initiatives create public value for all relevant stakeholders.

The next three articles focus on social media and politics and address the theme from various perspectives. Kaun and Guyard enquire as to whether the social media will function as new public spheres or as spaces for merely private matters and assert that the euphoria associated with the possibilities to enhance democracies with the use of Web 2.0 appears to ignore the fact that the majority of citizens are excluded from this democratizing revolution. Focusing on the Swedish national election 2010 and drawing heavily from earlier Dahlgren's work the authors reveal that there is a big gap between the potential voters and their actual practices as students were largely negative to election campaigning through social media, clearly preferring to receive political information through the traditional media. In their piece, Manuel and Francisco look at several innovative activities in Southern European countries that try to explore new local types of cultural autonomy for citizens through the use of new communication technologies. The authors argue that in regions such as Andalusia there could be a radical shift in public policies related to the Information Society, but starting with viewing it from bottom up: making citizens talk and be heard.

The study by Veglis and Spyridou investigates the level and form of interactivity offered by the websites of main political parties of the Southern European territory of Greece, a county with high levels of distrust towards political institutions and parties. The findings demonstrate that overall the political parties are unwilling to reshape the communication hierarchies and create a fresh set of participatory and dialogic communication practices. Rather, the Internet is largely used to reproduce a hierarchical and persuasive communication model. The final article by Veugels deals with the hot theme of privacy in relation to social networks like Facebook and asks important questions such as: Why Facebook uses opt-out rather than opt-in choices? Is the social network pushing people to become 'less private'? Is online privacy an illusion? These issues are looked at from an integrated social scientific and legal/regulatory approach, by investigating Facebook's privacy policy, and by adopting the findings from the project CUPID (Cultural Profile and Information Database).

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