Ancuta-Gabriela Tarta
PhD Candidate
Department of Media, Cognition and Communication
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Clash of the European public spheres: offline versus online, and cultural versus political

This paper presents some featured theories and perspectives on the European public sphere, followed by the reflections they generated. It further offers an overview of the cultural public sphere of the EU and it's relation to the public sphere in the political realm. This paper tries to cast light on issues that are relevant to my current PhD research, which explores the manifestation of cultural public sphere(s) throughout the EU, governed by the new and more unconventional means of online communication – social networking websites.

Public sphere, from Habermas to Facebook

When developing the concept of the public sphere, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas underlined the crucial role that the media plays in shaping the public sphere. Although developed in the 60s[1], the theory of Habermas is still of reference for most researchers approaching the issue of the public sphere.

For Habermas, the *public sphere* is defined by the debate of public issues, debate in which the players have to use valid *arguments.* The German philosopher manages to offer a theory, as well as a complete radiography of the functioning of the public sphere, since its emergence as a bourgeois public sphere in the 18th century. Habermas refers to it as a *zone* between the political sphere of the state's institutions and the private sphere of the individual. This zone generates tensions when the state does not fulfill its role of ensuring social progress and welfare. It is defined by the *debate* between the state's institutions and the citizens, debate moderated by the public opinion, which is today shaped and voiced by the media.[2]

Habermas's definition of the public sphere lies on three major concepts: *the individual, the debate* and the *public space.* The individual is seen, in the light of the 18th century philosophy, as being rational, capable of debating using valid arguments and capable of making decisions. The debate is mandatory for establishing the public good, since the individuals are equal and none of them possesses the absolute truth. Therefore, society's decisions have to be taken through debates, which should include as many *different perspectives* as possible. For Jürgen Habermas, the rational debate, based on the communicational process, is the only one that validates the existence of the public

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[1] Jürgen Habermas first published *Struktur der Offentlichkeit* [Structural Transformarion of the Public Sphere] in 1962.
[2] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Boston: MIT Press, 1991).

sphere.[3] The public space is situated between the private space (family, personal issues) and the state's space (administrative, jurisdictional, legislative etc).

In this context, the role of the media is seen as promoter of the interests of the actors in society. It offers a platform for discussion and it represents an opinion aggregator. However, Habermas also argues that, besides offering a platform for debate, the mass media can also manipulate the public, because they serve particular interests of the owners, who are influential individuals or groups with political power.[4] This approach to the ambivalent role of media in the society is entirely applicable today.

The public sphere model of Habermas is demanding in terms of rationality of the arguments of the actors involved. The liberal model, on the other hand, does not pay so much attention to the quality of the discourse. The public opinion is no more than the aggregation of individual opinions, and mass-media is just one of many ways in which the interests of the people influence political decisions. According to the liberal model of the public sphere, discussed by Jürgen Gerhards[5], the organized collective groups, such as political parties and interest groups dominate the public debate and are the ones who provide most input for political decision-making. These groups aggregate the preferences and opinions of individual citizens and represent their interests. This view is different from the one of Habermas, who expects political input directly from individual citizens, as well as from collective actors from the society. But while for Habermas the input must be based on rational arguments, the liberal model accepts all points of view, all communicators and actors, as long as they respect other points of view.

Besides these two models, there is a third one that regards the media as the "constructor" of the public sphere.[6] Although there are several areas where people can interact directly and exchange opinions and information (coffee shops, clubs, university areas, parks etc), the media represents the most influential source of ideas and provides most input for political decision and opinion formation. Public opinion is therefore regarded as a media construct. The media act as gate keepers, allowing access of different individuals and group actors to expressing points of view and therefore influencing political decisions. This model is of particular interest in the research regarding the emergence of a European public sphere. The media represents the most important connection between the citizens and the European institutions and decision-making processes. People get their information about the activity of the European institutions from the media, and they have an image of the European Union based on what they see in the media. "The media" here implies the traditional media, both print and audiovisual.

The EU as a public sphere

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[3] *Ibid.* 177-178.
[4] Winfried Schulz, *op. cit.*, 58.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Klaus Schoebach and Lee B. Becker, "Origins and Consequences of Mediated Public Opinion", in *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent,* ed. T.L. Glasser and C.T. Salmon (New York: Guilford press, 1995), 323-47.

There has been considerable debate in the last decade regarding the existence and functionality of a European public sphere. This appears to be one of the most important research topics related to the European Union today. The relation between the European institutions and its citizens, moderated by the public opinion through mass-media, is the core of a functional European public sphere. But such a relation is also vital for the functioning of the European Union as a whole.

If we apply the public sphere models we previously discussed to the EU, a European public sphere has to fulfill several functions.[7] One of these functions is *transparency,* in the sense that it should give visibility and voice to all individuals and social groups can express their opinions. Then, a functional EU public sphere would *legitimate* the political institutions and decisions that are being taken for the public good of the Union. It would also *validate* opinions expressed by different societal actors through *debate.* It would also have a *responsive* function, as policy makers can encounter here the opinions of the citizens, and a *participatory* function − a space that encourages all actors to engage in public debate.

The various definitions of the European public sphere are based on the different functions it should achieve. Before we take a look at these definitions, however, one more point has to be made. There is little consent among the researches whether we are dealing with *a* European public sphere, or rather *several* public spheres. The EU public sphere is regarded as a transnational structure, but the degree of its homogeneity is highly questionable. On one hand, most theoretical models developed to explain the EU public sphere are rather idealistic and often lack empirical evidence. It is the case Habermas's model of the public sphere, which we have already discussed. The German researchers Ruud Koopmans, Friedhelm Neidhardt, and Barbara Pfetsch also offer a model of an EU public sphere based on a combination of elements of the German, the Dutch and the Swiss public spheres, which all present certain similarities with the European Union's public space. The authors do present empirical evidence from the countries they analyze, but the model they offer is more of a projection of what an EU public sphere could be. As they eventually conclude: "…a European public sphere will only be able to emerge if Brussels and Strasbourg become more of a political centre in which politically relevant decisions are taken that are at least partly independent from national governments" [8].

On the other hand, the researchers who draw heavily on empirical evidence tend to conclude that it is more accurate, at this point, to talk about national public spheres that are *Europeanized*. In other words, we are dealing with an EU public sphere that is a result of the Europeanization of the national public spheres. Citing Jürgen Gerhards, professor Claes H. de Vreese offers such a realist model of a European public sphere. Two criteria should be fulfilled in order to have Europeanized public spheres: a substantial coverage of EU subjects, actors and issues in the national media, and the evaluation of these subjects and actors from a broader perspective, one that exceeds the national

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[7] Claes H. de Vreese, "The EU as a Public Sphere"*, Living Review Euro Governance,* Vol. 2, No.3, 2007:5 (online article) http://europeangovernance.livingreviews.org/Articles/lreg-2007-3 (accessed June 20, 2010).
[8] See Ruud Koopmans, Friedhelm Neidhardt, and Barbara Pfetsch, *Conditions for the Constitution of a European Public Sphere,* page 20 (discussion paper for Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, Berlin, Germany), ftp://ftp.cordis.europa.eu/pub/improving/docs/ser_citizen_koopmans.pdf (accessed June 24, 2010).

borders and interests.[9] These criteria can be verified thorough an analysis of the media coverage of European topics. Research has been conducted in several European countries (see the Europub project: http://europub.wzb.eu), and the results show a rather weak degree of Europeanization in the EU member states.

Featured definitions of the EU public sphere

There are a lot of definitions of the European public sphere and probably none of them can be considered completely accurate, as long as we cannot point whether we are dealing with a European public sphere or Europeanized public spheres. However, several definitions are proposed and we will further discuss some of them.

For Brantner et al.[10], the European public sphere is a space for communication between political actors and citizens, a space where matters of common interest are discussed. This definition is broad, but one important aspect must be noted: the public sphere is not linked to the activity of the national state. It also emphasizes a classical characteristic of a public sphere − the debate of the issues. For Erik O. Eriksen, the public sphere "can no longer be seen as one uniform national public sphere, but as polymorph, polyphonic and even anarchistic"[11]. This is applicable to a European space that is highly heterogenic. Friedhelm Neidhardt considers the *feedback* of the debates taking place in the public arena. Thus, the public sphere is a system of communication when opinions are gathered, debated and passed on. In other words, circulating the ideas and the results of the discussion of the issues is of crucial importance. [12]

Norwegian professor Hans-Jörg Trenz defines the European public sphere as "the communicative infrastructure that is used for debating the legitimacy of the project of the European integration"[13]. This view is of particular interest to us, as it takes into account the idea of an *infrastructure* used for debating. Such an infrastructure is of crucial importance for even conceiving the idea of a debate of European issues among European citizens. Any public sphere must offer citizens the possibility to discuss the decisions of the political institutions, as well as passing on the result of these discussions. Without a proper infrastructure it is hard to imagine the functioning of a public sphere.

The issue of infrastructure is even more stringent if we consider a transnational public sphere, such as the European one. European decision-makers (institutions) are situated at a considerable distance

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[9] Claes H. de Vreese, *op. cit.,* 9.

[10] Cornelia Brantner et al., *Europeanization of national public sphere: empirical evidence from Austria*, conference presented at First European Communication Conference, Amsterdam, November 24-26, 2005.

[11] Erik Eriksen, *Conceptualizing European public spheres: General, segmented and strong publics,* ARENA Working Paper, Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway, 2004.

[12] Friedhelm Neidhardt, "Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meining, soziale Bewegungen", in *Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meining, soziale Bewegungen*, (Ed.) Neidhardt, Friedhelm, vol. 34 of Sonderheft der Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen, 1994: 7–41, cited by Claes H. de Vreese, *op. cit.,* 6.

[13] Hans-Jörg Trenz, *In search of the European Public Sphere: Between normative overstretch and empirical disenchantment,* 2008: 1, http://www.arena.uio.no/publications/working-papers2008/papers/wp08_12.pdf (accessed June 25, 2010).

from most citizens whose lives they influence. This is one of the reasons why European issues generate little debate: people find it hard to understand how the European political actors influence their lives. They represent a reality situated far away, with little to no access to. The Euro barometer results of autumn 2009[14] are rather discouraging. Although 54% of the people have a good opinion about the way in which the European democracy works, 14% of those interviewed still have no opinion about this issue at all and 24% declared themselves not at all satisfied. Around 50% of those interviewed have trust in the European institutions (Parliament and Commission), while about 33% have no trust at all. If we are to extract a conclusion for these studies, we could say that the support for European democracy is a "50-50" situation. Without public support, the legitimacy of European political actors becomes highly questionable.

This makes it very important to understand the communicative infrastructure between the European institutions and the citizens. Where do people get their information from, and to what extent are they willing to express opinions regarding European topics?

Clash of the public spheres I: offline versus online

We often have the impression that things are more complicated than they actually are, and we usually act in consistence with this view. The idea of this research was inspired to me by the read of several works investigating the functionality of a European public sphere. Most of these researches focus on data from the traditional forms of media (newspapers, radio, and television), and tend to rule out the use of the Internet in investigating a public sphere throughout Europe. Sure, the rate of Internet penetration among users in the EU is still rather low, and so is the level of literacy. But perhaps the question is not only to prove the existence or absence of a European public sphere, in various degrees, but also to see *how it can be developed.* Most researchers in the field, starting with Habermas, agree that the future of the European Union in democratic terms is highly questionable without the existence of a functional public sphere. However, The Euro barometer results of autumn 2009[15] are rather discouraging. Although 54% of the people have a good opinion about the way in which the European democracy works, 14% of those interviewed still have no opinion about this issue at all and 24% declared they were not at all satisfied. Around 50% of those interviewed have trust in the European institutions (Parliament and Commission), while about 33% have no trust at all. If we are to extract a conclusion for these studies, we could say that the support for European democracy is a "50-50" situation. Without public support, the legitimacy of European political actors becomes highly questionable. According to a qualitative Euro barometer research dated 2007, the image of European political actors and matters that people get from the national media is rather blurry, and people tend to link Europe and the European Union in a confusing way. [16]

When discussing the different models of a public sphere across Europe we stressed a third model that regards the media as a platform of debate, as well as the most influential input provider for

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[14]*Eurobarometer 72,* autumn 2009: 27-28, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb72/eb72_first_en.pdf (accessed June 27, 2010).
[15]*Eurobarometer 72,* autumn 2009: 27-28, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb72/eb72_first_en.pdf (accessed June 27, 2010).
[16] *Ibid.* 42.

political decisions and an aggregator of the public opinion. Media is the main source of European information for people and it has a strong impact on the image citizens have on the institutions from Brussels and Strasbourg. Political actors consult public opinion through surveys and other social research methods. The media, however, remains the most powerful tool they have to influence the citizens.

To sum up so far, media has at least a quadruple role in the public sphere: it represents the *platform (infrastructure) for debate* for both political actors and citizens, it is the main *information source* for citizens in European matters, it is a an aggregator of the *public opinion,* and it is a promoter of the *feedback (debate output),* passing on ideas and opinions. According to studies conducted in several countries of the European Union, media coverage of European subjects is rather low. A qualitative Euro barometer research dated 2007 analyses EU content in television programmes shows that the main source for people's recollections on the European Union is national television news. Television remains the main source of European information for citizens aged 20-50, and the most potentially effective. [17] However, the image of European political actors and matters that people get from television proves to be rather blurry. The same study shows that people tend to link Europe and the European Union in a confusing way. One of the reasons for this is the inadequate or insufficient information they get from television.[18] Respondents stress the negative aspects of the news and generally consider (similar to the research conducted in 2004) that they are presented inadequately and weakly. European news coverage has several handicaps. First, a dull and unappealing character, and a rather abstract and distant aspect. Citizens declare to find it hard to relate to European information, which does not seem to be interesting or have any connection with their daily life. Secondly, there is a lack of perspective in EU news, one that makes people ask themselves "so what?" at the end of watching it. Information is not properly contextualized and explained, and is often rather superficial. The German and Romanian respondents particularly underlined the lack of analysis in the materials, and the increased sensationalism present in them. Last but definitely not least, people consider coverage of European news as being biased, lacking pluralism and debate.[19]

These three last laments people expressed are actually the most critical ones regarding media's role in the public sphere. As we noted so far, all definitions consider pluralism of opinion and debate as being essential components of the public space, which makes it questionable whether the media actually fulfills its role. As Hans-Jörg Trenz also stated, "there is little evidence that the established institutional links between the media and the nation-state will be weakened"[20].

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[17]*Information on Europe on television* (qualitative study among TV viewers in the 27 members states), April, 2007: 46, 53, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/quali/ql_eurotv_2007_en.pdf. (accessed June 27, 2010).
[18] *Ibid.* 42.
[19] *Ibid*. 49.
[20] Hans-Jörg Trenz, *op, cit.,*8.

So, could the flaws of the old media be reduced by the new media? To a certain extent, it can be argued that the online medium is the most viable "public space", as it is the fastest way of communication and it allows major social interaction and live debate, and can be accessed from basically any point of the European space. At the same time, the essentially interactive nature of Web 2.0 facilitates participation to discussions and debates. The Internet as a public space is one of the very actual debates regarding the functionality of the public sphere, and is particularly relevant when applied to the European Union.

While in terms I chose to investigate the online social networks and their potential as European public spheres. As a first argument: most websites of traditional media institutions are linked to Facebook, YouTube and other similar social networking sites. So are the European institutions and political representatives. Citizens can very well get informed from various places, while forums and the networking sites can constitute viable platforms for discussions and debates that can involve a large number of citizens, with various cultural and social backgrounds.

Clash of the public spheres II: the cultural versus the political

Perhaps this is a good time to clarify the possibly confusing title of this paper: the purpose is not to declare a winner out of the two public spheres. The intention is mainly to pin down the characteristics of what is known as the cultural public sphere. Nonetheless, the relation between the cultural public sphere and the far more featured political public sphere is another messy affair. I will further try to disentangle it, as far as our literature review allows it.

"To define is to kill. To suggest is to create" (Stéphane Mallarmé)

To suggest a definition, however, might be a key for understanding what is at issue. Researches on the political and cultural public spheres offer definitions, descriptions and explanations of these concepts. Habermas's early theory explains on the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere from the private sphere of the individual. The bourgeois public sphere, Habermas states, "may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor."[21]

Habermas makes a distinction between the literary public sphere (the public sphere of letters), and the public sphere of the political realm. Although "in general, the two forms of the public sphere blended with each other in a peculiar fashion"[22], their origins are different. The literary public sphere originated in coffee houses and salons, where "The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its

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[21]Jürgen Habermas (German(1962)English Translation 1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Thomas Burger, Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p. 30
[22] Habermas 1989, 55

meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority."[23]

 The literary public sphere is a precondition for the emergence of the political one. The definitions Habermas assigns to the literary public sphere might be restrictive, but he makes a crucially important point (that I believe is very much applicable today) when claiming the interdependence of the two public spheres: the political and the literary.

Elaborating on this distinction, cultural analysis professor Jim McGuigan offers an update of the concept of literary public sphere, expanding it into a cultural public sphere. In McGuigan's view, the cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication.[24] He identifies three faces of the cultural public sphere. First, the *uncritical populism is* associated with the populist cultural studies. The credibility of popular culture derives not from its rational discourse, but from its affinity with emotional wisdom. Simply put, the consumer capitalism is culturally democratic, and the sovereignty of the consumer goes unquestioned.[25] This is indeed a very interesting point to make, and I will come back to it later on, when discussing the role of infotainment in the cultural public sphere.

The second stance of the cultural public sphere is *radical subversion.* Having its roots in the 1960s American counterculture movement and other such anarchist movements, radical subversion in contemporary society is associated with the cultural practices of the global movements for social justice. In McGuigan's view, radical subversion is the opposite of uncritical populism. Instead of the apologetics of the consumerist practices, it proposes total transformation of the society, and is often associated with anti-globalization and anti-capitalism movements.[26] Radical subversion movements aim at the "un-cooling" of society, criticize the degrading of consumer-driven society, and wish to restore authenticity and simplicity of life.

The third stance McGuigan identifies is the *critical intervention.* This combines the best of uncritical populism – the existing cultural field -, with radical subversion, and sums up to what we know as popular culture. Television still remains at the heart of popular culture today. Even the most prestigious and reputed news institutions, such as BBC, occasionally engage in commercial populism, as it cannot ignore the trends of a free market.[27]

 These three stances might not be the only manifestations of a cultural public sphere, as we will see further. However, one very important aspect must be underlined: the fact that the cultural public sphere refers to the *articulation of politics through affective modes of communication.* This definition calls for deeper reflection, firstly because it underlines a close connection of the cultural and the political public sphere. The cultural public sphere, as stated is *also* about politics – the articulation of politics through cultural communication and cultural practices. McGuigan is not

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[23] Habermas, 1989, 35.
[24]24 Jim McGuigan, *The Cultural Public Sphere,* European Journal of Cultural Studies, 2005, 8:427
[25] McGuigan, 2005, 436.
[26] McGuigan, 2005, 437-438
[27] McGuigan, 2005, 439

particularly specific as to whether the cultural public sphere is about the mainstream politics being articulated through aesthetic communication, in a way that it can be more digestible and appealing for the regular individual, or it is rather about what we can call "counter-politics" that is, a cultural reaction to the political system, discourse and practices. Radical subversion clearly follows the second line, while the other two stances can go both ways.

John Hartley and Joshua Green identify the cultural public sphere as emerging for cultural sources, rather than political ones (sauce as ethnic origin), and articulated through the private pursue of individual life and leisure activities.[28] The cultural public sphere can develop more or less outside what the authors call "the" public sphere, referring to the political one. The article also discusses the notion of counter-publics, in opposition to the one public of "the" public sphere. Counter-public sphere develop using various media channels that are mostly invisible to the mainstream media. They are also *not constant;* they usually come into being around a *cultural motif*. The example offered here is that of a public sphere on the beach. The beach is a cultural factor of crucial importance for the Australian society. However, Hartley & Green place the cultural public sphere far away from politics (be it official or counter!), although at times it can represent a connection (and mediator) between culture and the politics.[29]

Cultural versus political: where do we draw the line?

We can at this point identify an important function of the cultural public sphere, in relationship with the political one and the society. As Habermas noted, "the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm"[30]. But Habermas refers mainly to the 18th century literary public sphere, and the quality, serious and mainstream art. However, in today's society, popular culture can help raise citizens' awareness of the far more un-interesting, but otherwise important political matters. One important function the cultural public sphere has is that of making the political public sphere more approachable, and whether we like it or not, that usually sums up to making it more popular. Manuel Castells argues that the public interest in politics is mediated by scandal.[31] The infotainment programs might be a way of raising the public's interest in political matters that otherwise might seem dull and unappealing.

Perhaps this is a possible answer for an eternal question regarding the implication of citizens in the public sphere, and their usual lack of interest for political matters. As Jim McGuigan states it, it is unrealistic to expect people to care about official politics, which they can hardly influence, with the same passion and dedication with which they treat their personal lives and relationships to others. This is even more applicable if we think in the political context of the European Union. EU decision makers are situated at considerable distance from citizens, and most political processes are intricate enough to discourage any interest and proper understanding. Most of us don't have enough time and energy to follow home politics, so another just another level is most of the times out of the question. Recent surveys show that the most influential source of European information is the

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[28] Hartley&Green, 2006, 342.
[29] Hartley&Green, 2005, 347, 357.
[30] Habermas, 1989, 56.
[31] Castells, 1997, 435.

television. However, most citizens consider EU news as dull and unappealing, with little connection to everyday life.

Starting from such premises, it becomes rather unrealistic to expect citizens to involve in active debate inside the European public sphere at a large scale. One thing that we can expect, and that is possible and controllable, is the engagement of the European institution in a more popular communication with their citizens. The reaction of the citizens to such an informal and primarily cultural way of communication is what I try to investigate in my research. Public reaction to a political issue is often emotional and aesthetic, instead of rational. As stated before, the idea that one as a citizen can do very little to influence political decision is widespread. As a result, citizens often discuss political and societal aspects in an aesthetic and emotional manner. Rational communication is necessary, but it is the culturally-framed message that often reaches larger audiences and generates reactions. And it is not rare that emotional and aesthetical experiences are the flashlight for looking at what are otherwise considered obscure and unintelligible political matters.

The Internet might be the place for manifestation of cultural public sphere(s), which mediate between citizens and decision makers. The nature of the virtual space of the Internet, and the structure and of the online social networks tends to favor an informal type of communication, one that appeals primarily to emotional and aesthetic, rather than the rational.

My definition of the cultural public sphere takes a bit of a shift from the definitions featured so far, and focuses on characteristics and functions. It relies on the Internet as a virtual public space. Firstly, a cultural public sphere would be a *space* of communication between the citizens and the decision makers. The discourse in this space would range from rational arguments to the *"rhetoric of everyday life"*. Such a public sphere would appeal to emotional and aesthetic resources and arguments to translate heavy politics and make it accessible to a wide range of citizens. A cultural public sphere features cultural products of the *prosumers[32]*, which are both input and feedback for the political actors and policy makers. A cultural public sphere would be pluralistic in the liberal[33] way: allowing expression of all actors and points of view that engage in the communicational process. The cultural public sphere does not value consensus as much as freedom of expression. In fact, consensus is not even a purpose, the plurality of opinions is. A cultural public sphere will particularly value cultural-grounded arguments and topics. It would not avoid tensions and polarization of the discourse, since reaching consensus is not its goal. A cultural public sphere allows passionate discussions and irrational reactions. It does not aim to be *a single* public sphere,

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[32] "Prosumer" refers here to the participators in the online environment, who are a combination of "producers" and "consumers", as they engage actively in the consuming, but also producing online content.

[33] According to the liberal model of the public sphere, discussed by Jürgen Gerhards, the organized collective groups, such as political parties and interest groups dominate the public debate and are the ones who provide most input for political decision-making. These groups aggregate the preferences and opinions of individual citizens and represent their interests. This view is different from the one of Habermas, who expects political input directly for individual citizens, as well as from collective actors from the society. But while here the input must be based on rational arguments, the liberal model accepts all points of view, all communicators and actors, as long as they respect other points of view.

since that would be as unrealistic as fighting globalization. Globalization comes with fragmentation, and the cheered global village is fading away. The cultural public sphere is an environment for socializing, offering support for certain causes and dismissing others. It is a field where a rationally argued case might lose in front of an emotional one. While favoring participation, the cultural public sphere leaves room for those who don't want to participate.

While from this description it might seem a chaotic battlefield, it is important to remember that the cultural public sphere does *not* have the same functions as the political one, so it should not be judged by the same criteria. One of the core functions a cultural public sphere has is to raise awareness towards societal issues on one side, and on the activity of the policy-makers on the other, and this might be done by means that are usually considered outside the mainstream, or that are unacceptable in the public sphere of the political realm. Engaging in the cultural public sphere doesn't imply abandoning all rationality, but it often *does* imply acting in accordance with one's deep feelings and beliefs about an issue.

In the context of the European Union, the functionality of a cultural public sphere becomes even more relevant to such an extent that the political public sphere is hard to conceive otherwise. Citizens of the EU cannot be expected to develop a "feeling" of belonging to a transnational space, as long as this space is primarily a political construction. They cannot be expected to feel "united in diversity", and getting involved in "the" public sphere. They simply cannot be expected to feel and act like this, regardless of the unquestionable importance of a functional public sphere for the legitimacy of the European project. What citizens *can,* however, be expected to do, is act and express themselves in accordance with their cultural background, their likes, their dislikes and their inner beliefs. One place where these can be expressed is the virtual environment.

The virtual space and the online social networks have their flaws when regarded as public spheres. But then again, so do most theories of the public sphere, from Habermas to the present. This is one of the reasons why at this point I believe it is unrealistic to speak of anything more than online social networks being at most an exponent of the cultural public sphere. Although we might be passed Habermas's ideal model, the public sphere in the political realm should still obey certain rules that ensure its effectiveness. In the case of the virtual cultural public sphere, rules for participation usually overlap the rules of a certain virtual environment (social network, blog, forum etc).

One theory is particularly relevant in evaluating the relation between the political and the cultural public sphere: Peter Dahlgren's overview of civic cultures:

"The idea of civic culture takes as its starting point the notion of citizens as social agents, and it asks what the *cultural* factors are behind such agency (or its absence). Civic cultures point to both the conditions and the manifestations of such participation; they are anchored in the mind-sets and symbolic milieu of everyday life. Civic cultures are potentially both strong and vulnerable: They help to promote the functioning of democracy, they can serve to empower or disempower citizens, yet like all domains of culture, they can easily be affected by political and economic power. A key

assumption here is that a viable democracy must have an anchoring at the level of citizens' lived experiences, personal resources, and subjective dispositions."[34]

It is perhaps more clear from this view that politics (and "the" public sphere) should to some extent rely on the premises of cultural public sphere in a viable democracy. This was not an alien idea in Habermas's theory, and it should be less of an alien today.

To sum up, two main functions can be attributed to the cultural public sphere, in direct connection to the political one:

> ➢ Raising awareness of the public, towards both mainstream and counter politics, and

> ➢ Mediating between the political public sphere and the civic cultures.

These functions and this overview of the cultural public sphere(s) are of course not to be taken in absolute terms. However, I believe a theory of the cultural public sphere that can hope for success should follow a descriptive, bottom-up approach, rather than a normative-prescriptive one. As we have seen so far, the European institutions play an important role in the public sphere, as I conceive it. This view may contradict certain theories of the cultural public sphere, which see it as being articulated away from the political realm. Indeed, we consider that in the case of the European Union, the institutions could play a more important role in the fostering of the public sphere.

Not long before his death Jean Monet, one of the "parents" of the European construction said that, if he were to rethink the construction of the European community, he would start from a cultural basis. We support this point of view and believe that cultural aspects underlie European identity, which is of first importance for fostering a public sphere throughout Europe. Moreover, we believe that the cultural public sphere is actually the first step to take in order to develop a political public sphere, which would solve the problem of democratic deficit in of the European institutions.

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