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Goodbye Privacy! Welcome Publicity?

Ina: We've never posted any intimate details on the Internet, and romantic sunsets from the vacations we've taken together aren't to found on *Flickr* or *YouTube*. I don't maintain a blog of my experiences. I even get uncomfortable in a restaurant when the tables are too close together or, worse yet, when people are seated there who can listen in on my personal conversation. It irritates me even when they're wrapped up in a discussion of their own and are definitely not paying the least bit of attention to what I happen to be saying at the moment. So, to the question of whether my private sphere is important to me, the answer is a resounding YES.

Armin: In our first brainstorming session about "Goodbye Privacy," the conference theme, we quickly came to the conclusion that it would be wrong to proceed under the assumption that we know what is meant by "the private sphere" or "privacy." For a number of reasons, we deemed it necessary to make the meaning of the terms themselves and their theoretical framework one of the issues we aim to address.

Along with so-called intellectual property, privacy is one of the most important public policy issues involving the Internet. From our work as journalists, we are well aware that reportage about the threat to the private sphere posed by surveillance technologies and control legislation does indeed generate a certain thrill effect, but it doesn't really shake up anyone besides those who are already "true believers." Many politicians come out in favor of dismantling the private sphere as a necessary evil in the war against terrorism, but, for civil society, giving up freedom in exchange for security is a really bad deal.

Ina: The question of what value the private sphere has for society isn't so easy to answer. Our discussions about "Goodbye, Privacy" quickly made us cognizant of the fact that what we do and say in the privacy of our own homes is not threatened. We don't have to say goodbye to this privacy. Quite the contrary: it is celebrated, staged, omnipresent in the media. Whoever relinquishes it usually does so voluntarily. But what are the consequences of the inflationary way that what is private is now being made public?

The new tools of self-publication available on the Internet change not only our view of what is private but also our relationship to the public sphere. This conceptual pair has thus come to occupy the spotlight of attention, and books like *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* by Jürgen Habermas, *The Human Condition* by Hanna Arendt and *The Fall of Public Man* by Richard Sennett have become required reading for concerned citizens.

On the subject of the term "public," Hannah Arendt wrote: "First of all, it means that everything that appears before the general public is visible to and audible by everyone, whereby everyone receives the greatest possible public attention."[1] The second meaning of the term "public" designates the world itself—that is, that which constitutes common space and is shared by all, that which is considered jointly held property. "Rather, the world itself is both a construction created by the hand of mankind as well as the quintessence of all the matters and affairs that are played out among human beings and that manifest themselves tangibly in the constructed world."[2] Hannah Arendt analyzed the private sphere as a precondition for and point of departure of a

public sphere whose interactions are the basis for the critical correction of power. In her book *The Human Condition* (German title: Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben), the philosopher wrote: "Leading only a private life means, first and foremost, living in a state in which one is deprived of certain essential human things."[3] Maintaining that the absence of feelings of interpersonal connectedness had become a mass phenomenon, Hannah Arendt viewed this as a consequence of a mass society that destroys not only the public sphere but the private sphere as well."

In his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* Jürgen Habermas takes up the relationship between the private sphere and public, political life that had been elaborated on by Arendt. Habermas acknowledges that the meanings of public and private had changed fundamentally since antiquity, but he expressed the opinion that, even now, the Hellenistic model of the public sphere still possesses a certain "normative power."[4] In the 17th century, and thus during a time of expansion of commerce and growth of private property in Europe, there emerged a private sphere in which educated citizens engaged in exchanges of opinions. This private sphere, according to Habermas, became the breeding ground of a critical public that constituted a counterweight to governmental power.[5]

Thus, the public and private spheres are not diametrical opposites in the narrow sense; rather, they came into existence at the same time in history and coexist in an interdependent relationship that can be termed dialectical. Habermas noted that the triumph of bourgeois society over the absolutist state and the subsequent expansion of the public sphere already began to usher in its decline.

This critique is taken further by Richard Sennett in his book *The Fall of Public Man* in which the logic of Industrial Society is said to lead to a "dead public space": "When everyone has each other under surveillance, sociability decreases, silence being the only form of protection."[6]

The example he cites is that of the modern open-plan office: "When people are all day long visually exposed to one another, they are less likely to gossip and chat, more likely to keep to themselves."[7] This means that transparent environments are not necessarily conducive to social interaction. What is designed to boost efficiency and productivity in the workplace most certainly does not promote community spirit. Without the protection of a private sphere, people withdraw. Or, as the American sociologist formulated it: "Human beings need to have some distance from intimate observation by others in order to feel sociable."

That public dealings always involve masks is another hypothesis of this 1976 book. When these masks are absent, what comes about is something that might be termed the "terror of intimacy." In this connection, Richard Sennett speaks of the "intimate society" and the "end of public culture": "The system of public expression became one of personal representation."[8] The cult of personality demands extroverted, outgoing characters. This "process of self-expression" is said to be an ersatz for political discourse: "The public thus was emptied of people who wanted to be expressive in it, as the terms of expression moved from the presentation of a mask to the revelation of one's personality, of one's face, in the mask one wore in the world."[9]

Private loquaciousness endangers what Habermas calls "the critical public sphere." Personality-drive pop culture, the self-absorbed celebrity blah-blah of the tabloids and being bared Big Brother-style may be entertaining indeed but they don't create a general public that's interested in political discourse or the public good. "Private life is political," was a slogan of the 1968 protest generation. Almost 40 years later, one gets the impression from blogs full of personal concerns that the political discourse has been absolutely overwhelmed by the private sphere. Powered by Web 2.0 technologies, the I-stream has gone mainstream. What has remained unchanged is the persistent hope that the Internet can bring about the resurrection of civil society.

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The advent of citizens' networks was already being welcomed with the arrival of electronic mailboxes. While the public sphere was increasingly disappearing from the cityscape, there were celebrations of the emergence of a new critical public domain on the Web. Internet 1.0 was even associated with the chance that this could expand into a global phenomenon. From the Zapatistas who were posting the communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos online to the organizers of the World Social Forum, grass-roots democratic movements "without a leader, without a center, without an ideology" were already using the Internet with astounding efficiency in the 1990s to mobilize protest movements from the bottom rungs of the political hierarchy. There were experiments with new forms of political action such as virtual sit-ins. Nevertheless, what was being conjured up in mainstream media in the late '90s was, above all, the Internet as the source of potentially immeasurable wealth. And when the New Economy bubble burst at the turn of the millennium, many observers were ready to throw out the baby with the bathwater and sound the death knell for all the purported Internet utopias.

But it didn't take long for the next development to arrive. By 2004, open source handbook publisher Tim O'Reilly was proclaiming the maturation of the young Internet into Web 2.0. Linux and other open source software had triggered an unbelievably vibrant wave of innovation, and so-called dynamic Web applications or service-oriented architectures set off a new innovation boom in the Internet. The new "tools for self-publication" are giving rise to new public spheres whose relevance we want to discuss under the heading "The New Public Life." What is it, actually, that's being lived out here "in public"? Who are the millions of users of *YouTube, MySpace, Blogger* and *Wordpress?* What longings and needs are being expressed here? What role is played by life made public online?

The open question is whether these platforms, forums and channels constitute a common public sphere in the sense of critical potential for civil society, or whether this potential is nothing more than an illusion for the simple reason that the user-friendly sites that host this self-publication are not public facilities or commons, but rather private property for the most part. Just like the benches in shopping malls, *MySpace, YouTube* & Co. are public meeting places in a private domain. What we're permitted to do there and what's prohibited are decided by communications designers, start-up founders and venture capitalists. The process of personal exchange proceeds according to their rules. No one knows how long his/her bits and bytes will remain available in the provider's display case. Perhaps they'll be removed because they're "out of place"; maybe they'll be sold and taken down.

Actually, anyone who enters the world of the self-publicists and social networkers has already said goodbye to the private sphere in the classical sense. It almost seems as if we've witnessed the emergence of a new type of personality that has cast aside the old bourgeois rules of modesty and respectability. Of course, this can also be seen in a thoroughly positive light: as overcoming the repressions of patriarchy, as "outing" in the sense of the gay, lesbian, queer and transgender movement, as performative self-invention in the sense of Judith Butler.

But the fact is that denizens of the Web 2.0 mainstream take a rather thoughtless approach to dealing openly with their innermost feelings. Exhibitionism practised on a mass level simply does not lead to a discursive public sphere, but rather to the final victory of Sennett's "tyranny of intimacy." We inhabit i-society: whether at iGoogle or iTunes, the desire to show what you've got is stronger than the fear of being monitored. Indeed, this self-publication is not always completely voluntary. Some of the new applications that visualize our social relationships and friendship networks—*Xing* and *LinkedIn,* for example—are systematically used for job search and personnel recruitment purposes. Building up an online reputation, collecting "points" in

forums like Digg or its German counterpart Yigg are necessary preconditions for people to even take notice of your existence.

The predominantly privately-owned platforms for self-publication are extraordinarily well suited to data mining, to customized creation of personality profiles. What goes on in the communities branded as "architectures for participation" is an object of interest and a field of activity of entire armies of marketing analysts and brand-name consultants operating behind the scenes. User-generated data that provide indications of everything from personal inclinations to social trends are analyzed not only by those who harvest them; this is merchandise in inter-company, international commerce. The problem isn't registration of individual data traces but rather the evaluation of collective data flows, according to David Lyon. The Canadian sociologist describes the actual function of surveillance as *social sorting*, as the establishment of information structures designed to perform social selection.[10]

The unrivaled champions of data collection are the major search engines like Google. That corporation recently surprised the general public with what was apparently a well-meaning announcement that each user's individual "search history" would henceforth be stored in memory for only 18 months. After all, most people had probably not been aware that their search queries in combination with their IP addresses could even be archived for that long. Google, Yahoo & Co. lure users with a wide variety of offerings ranging from webmail and personal blogs to programs to create and edit texts and do spreadsheet calculations online. These data are then analyzed by indefatigable nerd-fairies, so that search engines will soon know more about us than we do ourselves. The magic word is "personalized search," which means that every query submitted to Google generates search results attuned to the user's personal interests.

This tendency is evident clear across the Internet's leading edge. Amazon proudly claims to know which book you want to read next even before you know it, while Last.fm suggests new music to you on the basis of a detailed profile of your personal musical taste, which is compared to the profiles of other users. As the new science of networks (as practiced by Albert-László Barabási, Duncan J. Watts and others) tells us, we are subject to the small-world phenomenon and are thus much more closely interrelated than we may have imagined. Network analysis investigates social relationships on the basis of models derived from mathematical graph theory. Today, everything can be depicted graphically—social relationships in a group or relations between devices that establish linkups in the Internet. How do certain nodes (people, websites, firms, concepts/ideologies) come to acquire more power than others? The individual who solves this puzzle is on the fast track to becoming the next Bill Gates or Mao Tse-tung.

The danger inherent in this is not only that interpersonal relationships are being reduced to the level of mechanical switches. What seems to be asserting itself here is the diktat of being connected. In today's discourse, concepts like personal autonomy and free will are shifted to the back burner; the spotlight is now on the probabilistic calculability of human beings. Whereas each individual one of us remains substantially unpredictable, we, in our statistical behavior as a mass, are calculable—whether as "rational profit optimizers" on the stock exchange or as consumers of assorted superfluous paraphernalia.

The vision of a control-based society perfected through the use of automated information technology is a sort of phantasm that is shared by certain segments of the ruling elite as well as their critics (the paranoids, you might say). These fantasies of technological omnipotence are getting updated these days in the social network analyses of risk capital firms and the computer dragnet techniques employed by law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

Whereas citizens are becoming increasingly transparent in their dealings with the state, the

executive branch of government is taking the liberty of expanding the body of information classified as top secret. From covert surveillance programs to clandestine flights to secret prisons, law enforcement and intelligence agencies have obtained powers that are not subject to direct democratic control. This also applies to large-scale political events in connection with which civil rights are temporarily suspended or annulled altogether—for example, arbitrary bans on demonstrations and orders to disperse groups peacefully assembled.

Georg Simmel, one of the founders of modern sociology, already began more than a century ago to work on the subject of secrets, which he characterized as one of civilization's greatest achievements. Furthermore, there are even certain situations in which we as individuals are capable of independent, autonomous action only when we are able to maintain secrecy. Simmel is cited by Helen Nissenbaum, who introduced the concept of "contextual integrity"[11] into the discussion of the private sphere.

The protection of the private sphere can best be defined as control over access to ones person. Philosopher Beate Rössler differentiates between local privacy (e.g. ones residence), decisional privacy (decisions and actions) and informational privacy, which refers to the control we exert over what others know about us.[12] Privacy is the foundation of individual freedom and autonomy; it's the zone in which we can take a refreshing break from our "public roles," in which we can form opinions and express them without risk, and in which we can share secrets. This form of privacy enables us to continue to function as political beings capable of acting on our own account.[13]

This cannot simply be a matter of a right established in writing, the loss of which we lament. In actual practice, there are many ways and means of putting up "creative resistance." They range from artistic interventions that beat the system with its own weapons to so-called privacy architectures based on open source software and open standards. The best way is probably to create and foster public spheres that are "common" and that consist of commons. These public spheres of civil society, realms that belong to the multitude,[14] make it possible to maintain or reassert control over domains that are settings for behavioral latitude, and to lead an active, vociferous public life. In this sense, "Goodbye, Privacy" ought to be followed up by a cheerful "Welcome Publicity!"

<div align="right">Translated from German by Mel Greenwald</div>

Ina Zwerger and Armin Medosch are the curators of the "Goodbye Privacy" symposium.

1 See Hannah Arendt, *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben,* 1972, Piper; p.65
2 Ibid, p.65
3 Ibid, p 73
4 See Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit,* 1962; 1990; Suhrkamp; p.57
5 This critical public sphere in which public opinion is formed out of conversations among private persons is by no means identical with the representative public sphere of a country. Later in "Die Gesellschaft des Spektakels," Guy Debord will critique a purely representative public sphere.
6 See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of the Public Man;* 1974; W.W. Norton; p. 15
7 Ibid, p.15
8 Ibid, p.26
9 Ibid, p.261
10 See David Lyon: "Security, Seduction and Social Sorting: Urban Surveillance" in *In the Shade of the Commons,* New Delhi: Sarai; See p. 52 in this catalog.
11 See p. 39 in this catalog
12 See Beate Rössler, *Der Wert des Privaten.* 2001, Suhrkamp; See p. 26
13 Ibid.
14 See Paolo Virno: *Grammatik der Multitude. Untersuchungen zu gegenwärtigen Lebensformen,* ID Verlag 2005