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Our New Public Life, 2.0

Web 2.0 consists of a set of technologies optimized for ease-of-use of publishing and interlinking of multi-media material by individual users.[1] Many components of this emerging infrastructure have been around for as long as the Internet, or at least the WorldWideWeb, has existed. But as a user-friendly aggregate, they have moved into the center of attention only within the last couple of years, both in terms of mass adoption and commercial technology development.[2] Almost all of the most well-known Web 2.0 platforms, such as Wikipedia, *YouTube, Flickr,* and most blogging companies, were founded well after the turn of the millennium. Today, it has become easier than ever for individuals, alone or in collaboration with others, to publish material, often drawing upon material published by others. And millions of people all over the world are using these possibilities. The extensive interlinking—through dynamic feeds, trackbacks, mash-ups and all sorts of metadata—is the element that makes this very different from keeping a private diary, journal or notebook. Yet, the character of the material published tends to be more personal, seemingly[3] reflecting personal, rather than organizational or otherwise vetted opinion.[4] One of the effects of this development has been the deepening and transformation of long-standing trends, blurring the lines between the social domains of the private—those things which (should) concern only the individual and her intimate context—and the public—those that (should) concern the community as a whole.[5] In the process, the lives of people who use such technologies are becoming more public in some way. But, clearly, this is not the kind of public (sphere) we are used to, the one that connects public to civic and civic to democratic. But what is it then?

In the following I will address this question on three levels, starting with the individual participating in this massive parallel experiment of "self-publishing" in both senses of the term: publishing by oneself and publishing oneself. Then I will look at the kinds of groups emerging from these activities and, finally, I will examine some of the societal effects of all of this. Three limitations of my analysis must be mentioned. First, I will only speak about the West, not only because technologies of Web 2.0 have emerged from this cultural context, but also because these technologies are, very deliberately, under-determined in terms of application and future development. This is not unusual for infrastructures.[6] Thus, it would even more inadequate than usual to adopt a techno-determinist stance and assume that technologies create the same social effects across different contexts.[7] Second, on all of these three levels, Web 2.0 technologies and their social uses interact with a vast number of factors that are completely independent of them, both online and off line. In social life, there are no single causes. Third, I will say very little about the gender inequality that remains in this area. Empirical research shows that whereas the gap between men and women in using Internet technologies in general is closing (in the US), in the area of Web 2.0, the gender imbalance is relatively strong (70% men).[8]

On the level of the individual, the boom of Web 2.0 extends a generally increasing individualization of society. As many observers have noticed, processes of "self-development" have become central to contemporary societies.[9] Over the last 50 years, the task of identity building has shifted away from relatively stable, hierarchical institutions (family, workplace, church) to the individual and his or her self-chosen context. In the 1960s, freedom-oriented social movements challenged a heavily bureaucratized society, rejecting its model of the "organization man"[10] and his "one-dimensional" personality.[11] Almost 40 years later, this development has reached the (commercial) mainstream as "creative industries" and instilled what cultural critic Marion von Oosten calls the "creative imperative", that is the systemic demand on individuals to be creative and

expressive.[12] Through a combination of pull and push processes, a sizable part of the population has acquired substantial cultural capital (the cultural assets at one's disposal), developed a heightened desire and need to be unique, found themselves within vastly expanded fields for self-expression and embarked on a search for recognition and reputation. The old division of labor in the field of culture, where a few highly individualized cultural producers worked for a relatively undifferentiated mass of consumers, is being complemented by a new culture of pro-sumerism, for the want of a better term, created by people who are users and producers at the same time. The DJ selecting and mixing records in a live setting, not the writer struggling alone with the empty page, is the contemporary cultural archetype. Though perhaps this cliché is already tired and being supplanted by the image of the blogger offering a personal take, in real time, on whatever slice of the world appears relevant to him or her. To users the new infrastructures offer ways to (re)establish their own link to the world, in whichever way they see it, be it the comings and goings of their cat, Scandinavian "necro metal", or global warming. Web 2.0 transforms people who used to be spectators into participants. Sometimes, the difference between these roles is so small that it might seem insignificant, but sometimes the consequences of this shift are enormous, bringing down governments or embarrassing corporations. The more spectacular cases show clearly what I would argue is the case everywhere. Building links to the world is not a passive act of observing, but an active intervention in the world, not least by validating some aspects of the world as important, that is, worthy of attention, while letting others fall out of sight. Yet, at the same time, it is also validating the person through his or her ability to establish those links, as the one capable of establishing meaning of whatever kind in a sea of noise. Yet, since this is done mainly through self-directed volunteer efforts (even if some make money) the meaning established is, first and foremost, a personal one. Thus, it's a process of co-creation of an individual identity and a world at large.

It seems plausible that this contributing to a psychological (self)experience is very different from the model still dominant, where the world inside of us, our self, is far removed from the world outside of us. The Cartesian *a prori "cogito ergo sum",* according to which the only thing we can ultimately be certain of is our individual thinking, is less convincing a starting point than it used to be. Rather, we are entering a world of "networked individualism", where individual self-identity—both in terms of the image one has of oneself as well as in terms of the image others have of one—can no longer be separated from one's position within a relational network.[13] This is a subtle, but very fundamental shift, obviously not caused by Web 2.0, yet most likely accelerated by it. The notion of "networked individualism" already indicates that individualization does not mean atomization or some other dystopic notion of people being isolated behind their computer screens. There is no "terminal condition".[14] Rather it points towards forms of identity situated between the fully autonomous individual, rooted in his or her privacy, and the faceless member of a collective, whose personality is subsumed under the identity of the group.

On the level of Web 2.0, we can see some of this new balance between individuality and sociality in an emerging, distinct pattern of collaboration. People seem to act neither as egoistic individuals, maximizing their resources *(homo economicus),* nor as selfless contributors to a collective effort *(gift economy).* Rather there is something in between. As Aguiton and Cardon, researchers working for France Telecom R&D, argue, Web 2.0 is characterized by "weak cooperation".[15] Usually, cooperation entails people first specifying a common goal and then working towards achieving it. Specifying the common goal is often a very difficult process, requiring considerable negotiations between all involved parties before the actual work can even begin.

Unless some shortcuts are introduced, be it through the market or hierarchical decision-making, these processes do not scale very well. Yet, with Web 2.0 we have sometimes very large groups working together quite productively (according to their own criteria). The reason for this seems to be that cooperation emerges after the fact, not as something planned beforehand. As already mentioned, since much of the Web 2.0 is self-directed volunteer work, it means people do it, first and foremost, for themselves. People publish their own works, drawing on works of others. Once these are published and visible to others, there is a chance, just a chance, to detect others whose own works or thoughts complement one's own ideas in a meaningful way. Thus cooperation can begin on a low-key, *ad hoc* level. Wikipedia is a good example here. The vast majority of contributors are only concerned with a very small number of articles. They may write once something on a topic they care about. In the process, some of them recognize that others care about the same thing, and they might interact with them on the basis of their shared, mutually-proven interest, whatever it is. Such cooperation requires minimal coordination and no planning or prior agreements. This is weak cooperation, based on weak social ties.[16] From that, some very few people might get interested in the project as a whole, and they start working less on their own article, but more on the administration of the system. In the process, they show to other administrators that they are committed and, based on that, they might become members of the core then, where weak cooperation slowly gives way to more conventional strong, that is planned, cooperation. Thus, in Web 2.0 weak and strong cooperation complement each other, but the key is that one does not need to become a member and identify with the project as a whole in order to participate. But by exposing oneself, by showing what one cares about, in one's own time and without payment, users offer themselves as trustworthy for collaboration.[17] Not all of them are interested in that, and the degree of collaboration varies vastly depending on the field of activity. In political blogs, collaboration, that is information sharing and interlinking, is very high. Yet, even in relatively individualistic platforms, such as the photo-sharing site *Flickr,* about 1 in 5 people joins some groups of shared interest, that is, uses some collaborative features offered by the site.[18]

This offers an indication that people are quite interested in cooperation and the sharing of information, which is always also information about themselves, but to a degree and in a pragmatic fashion. In most cases, commitments are limited and short term, which, of course, does not mean people do not also enter commitments that are much more comprehensive and long-term, but these are rare, for very obvious, pragmatic reasons. It is perhaps particularly this form of weak cooperation that makes people comfortable to make themselves public, assuming that the "public" is limited to the groups they collaborate with and the narrow context in which they are making that information available. All of this indicates that people take the construction of their own identity, and the world, to be a task that cannot be accomplished alone, yet that the big, comprehensive solutions traditionally offered to this twin problem are no longer particularly attractive.[19] Rather, it is addressed through many limited, pragmatic interventions, reacting to *ad hoc* opportunities and challenges with a high degree of flexibility.

If self-identity and the experience of the world is one of pragmatic fluidity and fragmentation / integration, then it seems safe to assume that, on a societal level, one of the effects is also the fragmentation of the public sphere into sub-spheres. These are becoming increasingly differentiated by internal culture and sets of rules, pragmatically assembled by the people who make up these publics as they go along. Since people inhabit more than one of these sub-spheres at the same time, and are moving between them, this does not mean the breakdown of social communication, but it nevertheless adds to the crisis of those institutions that require a traditional

public sphere to function. Compared with the immediacy and authenticity these new forms of cooperation seem to offer, partly because these limited, focused associations do not need to make difficult compromises, the discourse of the public sphere, particularly concerning politics, seems increasingly artificial and insincere. Not least because politicians need to make difficult compromises to gain majorities and offer overall solutions that cannot accommodate the high degree of singularity of the "mix-and-match" lives people are living.[20] Politics, and the public sphere around it, appears as the domain of cynics.

The assumption of most people seems to be that much of the material they share remains within the community for which it has been produced. One could call this bounded privacy. This is often correct from the point of view of the users. Yet, on the level of the system providers new meta knowledge about the intimate connections of the users, often not even known to the users themselves, is emerging. Social transactions are becoming visible to a degree unimaginable only a few years ago. However, not to everyone. In this context, the assumption of bounded privacy is as incorrect as the assumption of reciprocal transparency, meaning that one can see as much of others as they can see of oneself. The owners of the infrastructure know every transaction and can track the composition of society, or at least their slice of it, in real time. This visibility is strictly one way. Ordinary users have no way of accessing, or even validating, the knowledge the providers have of them and their actions. As an effect, within this new world of visibility and horizontality, new zones of invisibility and hierarchy are emerging. It is very hard to predict how and to what effect these will be used, or if we will even realize when this affects us. The potential of what sociologist David Lyon calls "social sorting", that is providing highly differentiated life opportunities to different groups (automatic discrimination), seems very high.[21] Of course, this develops in parallel with classic state surveillance, which is unlikely not to draw upon this potentially very valuable information. More generally, an inverse relationship seems to exist between the dissolution of privacy for citizens and the growing secrecy of administrative institutions, be they private or public. Saskia Sassen speaks about "the executive's privatizing its own power."[22] How much this is an executive's answer to the empowerment of the citizens through new collaborative technologies is open to discussion.[23]

None of this, of course, is single-handedly caused by Web 2.0 technologies, but I think that these technologies are accelerating and shaping these developments in their own ways, as I have outlined. The overall effects on the constitution of the public are decidedly mixed. The ability to meet strangers and start meaningful exchanges and cooperations seems to be rapidly expanding. We may be entering a golden age of voluntary associations, a kind of bourgeois anarchism.[24] Yet, at the same time, the ability of these new publics to function as counterweight to political power cannot (yet?) compensate, despite hopeful incidents,[25] for the emptying of the old public sphere. Thus, we might end up with the flowering of free cooperation within an authoritarian political framework.[26]

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